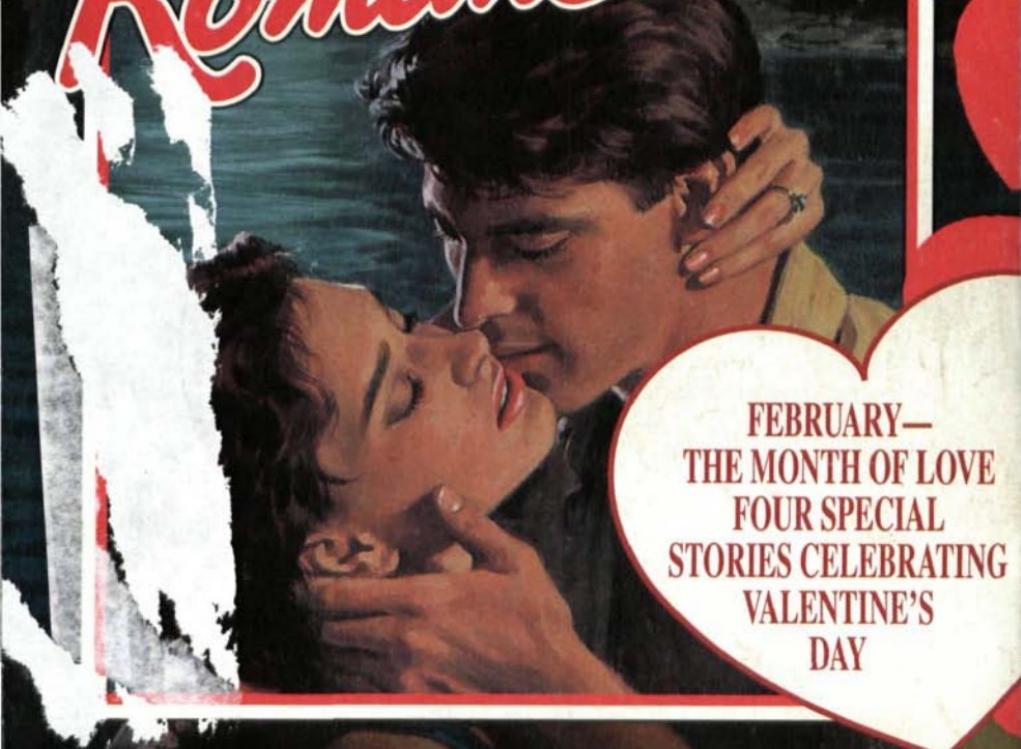


HARLEQUIN®  
WORLD'S BEST

# Romances



FEBRUARY—  
THE MONTH OF LOVE  
FOUR SPECIAL  
STORIES CELEBRATING  
VALENTINE'S  
DAY

Be Mine, Valentine  
To Have It All  
Cupid's Task  
Only with the Heart

VICKI LEWIS THOMPSON  
ROBIN ELLIOT  
SONDRA STANFORD  
SANDRA KITT



### VICKI LEWIS THOMPSON

Vicki Lewis Thompson tried out a few careers before realizing that she could actually pay the bills as a romance writer. A former English teacher and newspaper reporter, Vicki knew this was the job for her—not only because she loves her job, but also because, as she says, “I have an overactive imagination!”

### ROBIN ELLIOTT

Robin Elliott lives in a small, charming town in the high pine country of Arizona. She enjoys watching football, attending craft shows on the town square and gardening. Robin has published over sixty novels and also writes under her own name, Joan Elliott Pickart.



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*Romances*

From the desk of Candy Lee,  
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader,

Romance is in the air...as you can imagine Valentine's Day is one of my favorite times of the year. I really enjoy planning a special evening for that special person in my life. But before I order the champagne and make the reservations...I'm taking some time tonight to enjoy some wonderful romance reading!

As I peek inside this month's volume of the World's Best Romances, I slip easily into that Valentine's Day mood through our four stories, where a chance encounter leads to an unforgettable night that changes one woman's feelings about love--forever...about a man who knows what he wants from a woman, but she shows him that there's so much more...how Cupid lends a hand in healing two hearts so they can once again trust...and when an overwhelming passion erupts--could it have been engineered by Saint Valentine himself?

We hope that this Valentine's Day Edition of romance stories will provide you with the inspiration to make your Valentine's Day a real sizzler!

Best wishes,

*Candy Lee*

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112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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# Romances

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# VICKI LEWIS THOMPSON

## Be Mine, Valentine



Was Charlie Hartman just a lovable old lunatic for believing he was really St. Valentine? It was a question Roxie Lowell and Hank Craddock would ask themselves for years to come...if Charlie had his way.

*It began with the snow. Years later Roxie would wonder if old Charlie had arranged that, too. After all, if he'd told the truth about himself, then creating a little snow-storm in February wouldn't have taken much effort, even in the middle of the desert. The unusual weather could have been a coincidence, of course. Everything that happened afterward could have been a coincidence.*

**O**n that Friday afternoon when the snow hit Tucson, Roxie couldn't believe the fuss over a few drifting flakes. After twenty-seven winters in New Jersey she'd seen enough white stuff to last her forever. Apparently that wasn't true of her co-workers in the county clerk's office. With the first incredulous cry of "It's snowing!" they hurried outside to catch the snow on hands and tongues.

She was the only one who noticed when old Charlie trudged into the waiting area, his battered briefcase in his hand. His home was a bench in a nearby park. Every morning he brought a red rose to the county clerk's office for couples who applied for marriage licenses there.

"So what brings you here this afternoon?" Roxie leaned against the counter and smiled at Charlie.

"The weather." Charlie took off his worn fedora and brushed moisture from the scraggly feather stuck in the hatband. "When I chose to winter in Arizona, who would have imagined that I'd encounter snow?"

Roxie speculated for the hundredth time how a seemingly well-educated man ended up on the streets. "I don't want to embarrass you or anything, but...what will you do if it gets really cold tonight?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," he said, taking out a surprisingly snowy handkerchief to polish the figure-eight-shaped pin he always wore on his lapel. The gold pin and the pewter chess set he carried in his briefcase were probably the only things of value Charlie possessed. He played chess every day, and he wore the pin at all times, sideways, like the symbol for infinity. "I suppose my regular bench will suffice. I'll add another layer of newspapers, perhaps."

Roxie imagined the long night. What if he froze to death? "Charlie, I think you'd better come home with me until the weather improves."

"With you?" His blue eyes twinkled but he shook his head. "Oh, no, I wouldn't think of causing you any inconvenience."

"No, it'll be okay. The Osborns have a small guest house. You'd have complete privacy there." The more Roxie thought of the idea, the better it sounded. She'd been, she might as well face the fact, lonely. Before they left for the Orient, the Osborns had introduced her to the neighbors on either side, but Roxie had hesitated to intrude considering that she'd be house-sitting for only a year.

Of course there was Como, but she was just an animal, after all. Roxie thought of another argument to persuade Charlie, something to make him feel needed. "You could also help me with Como. She's been acting strange lately, and I'd like a second opinion about whether to call the vet. I don't want to waste the Osborns' money unnecessarily, but on the other hand..."

"Discerning an animal's needs can be difficult, all right. But Roxie, my child, aren't you getting ahead of yourself? Perhaps the Osborns would object to a common vagrant living on the premises while they're gone."

"You're not a common vagrant. You're my friend. I've known you for six months and we've shared our lunch hour for the past two. It's settled."

Charlie's wrinkled face creased into a smile. "Bless you, Roxie Lowell."

"Hey, Roxie." A man with dark hair and eyes left the crowd outside and strolled over to the counter. "Hi, Charlie."

Charlie nodded to the man. "Doug."

"Roxie, everybody's talking about going home early, and I wanted to make sure we were still on for that drink at the Samniego House."

"Gee, Doug, I'm sorry. I forgot about that, with the excitement about the snow and everything."

"A little snow wouldn't stop you, a girl from New Jersey, would it?" He pronounced the name of her home state "New Joisey," as he always did to tease her.

She laughed to humor him, but the joke had become old and she wished he'd find a more clever one. "No, of course the snow won't bother me, but I'm taking Charlie home tonight, because of the bad weather."

Doug's eyebrows shot up. He took her elbow and steered her several feet away from the counter. "Are you crazy? He's a bum, a transient."

"Doug!" Roxie glared at him defiantly. "I'm doing this, so don't try to stop me."

Doug raised both hands in a gesture of helplessness.

She returned to her desk for her coat and purse and soon joined Charlie in the lobby.

"He doesn't approve, does he?" Charlie asked.

"It's none of his business. We're dating, not married."

"Oh, Roxie, I certainly hope you won't consider marriage to Doug Kelly, of all people."

She glanced at him as they walked down the tiled hall of the courts building. "I have considered it, Charlie. I'm twenty-seven. I'm ready to settle down, raise a family." Roxie guided Charlie to-

ward the elevator that led to an underground parking garage.

"There's not enough love in him to inspire you," he said as they rode down. "It may not be entirely his fault, of course, with that name."

"Charlie, what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Doug's last name. Kelly means *warrior*. The name doesn't match at all with yours, Roxie," Charlie said as Roxie unlocked the passenger side of her old Volvo. Charlie waited until she was seated behind the wheel. "Lowell means *beloved*," he said.

"And your last name is Hartman." She started the car and drove out of the garage.

"Of course, that's not my real name. But I like the assonance of Charlie Hartman. It will do."

Roxie blinked. *Hartman wasn't his real name?*

They left downtown traffic and climbed northward into the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains.

"Isn't the snow delightful? The desert looks rather...surprised, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, it does, at that. Well, this is the street, Calle de Sueños." Roxie flicked on her left-turn signal.

"Street of dreams. How lovely."

"I should have guessed that you'd know Spanish."

"Ah, you have something under construction on your corner. That's a sturdy-looking chap on the roof. I like the way he holds his shoulders."

Roxie peered through the thickening snow to the man standing on the roof of the skeleton building. Charlie was right, the man created an intriguing picture silhouetted against the gray sky, his yellow hard hat like a beacon.

Roxie studied the large sign at the corner of the lot. "It says Craddock Design and Construction, Hank Craddock."

"Craddock, now there's a name for you."

"Okay, I'll bite. What does Craddock mean?"

Charlie looked at her with a satisfied expression. "Abounding in love."

FOUR DAYS of rain followed the freak snowstorm. Then the sun came out. Roxie made use of Como's absence with Charlie to clean out the stall in the miniature barn the Osborns had constructed for their llama. Then she lined the floor with fresh straw and raked the small corral. As she walked back toward the house, Charlie and Como arrived through the side gate fresh from their walk.

"What a joyous morning," he said, unbuckling Como's halter and closing her in the corral. "This halcyon weather is reminiscent of Southern Italy." Charlie's expression became dreamy. "Of course, Northern Italy is breathtaking, too. I remember how much Romeo and Juliet loved it."

"Romeo and Juliet?"

He glanced up, as if coming out of a trance. "They were... I suppose in today's vernacular, clients. That boy and girl had so much love, but..." He paused and shook

his head. "I prefer not to dwell on the sad stories." He opened the French door that led into the kitchen. "I want to tell you about Mr. Craddock."

"Who?" Roxie carried a grapefruit to the sink and rinsed it off.

"Hank Craddock, the chap we saw on the roof the first day I came here." Charlie hung his fedora on a rack beside the door. "Excellent person. We had a nice chat. I told him about you."

Roxie stopped sectioning the grapefruit and looked at him. "What do you mean, about me?"

"I told him you had flame-red hair and eyes the color of the sea. Oh, and I mentioned the freckles, too. He appears to be a man who would appreciate a few freckles."

Roxie put the knife down and turned to face him. "Charlie Hartman, whatever possessed you to do such a thing?"

Charlie smiled at her in that sweet way that had won her heart months ago when she'd first met him. "I could see no other recourse. Tuesday is St. Valentine's Day. Roxie, my dear child, we're running out of time."

Roxie stared at Charlie. "You really scare me when you say things that don't make sense."

"St. Valentine's Day could determine your whole future." Charlie spoke to her with the patient manner of a teacher confronted with a hopelessly slow pupil. "When you are a woman ready to fall in love, the first eligible man you meet on St. Valentine's Day is destined to become your lover and marry you within

the year. There have been rare exceptions, of course, but—"

"Charlie, you can't believe such superstitious nonsense."

He sighed and held up one hand. "Now, what worries me is that Tuesday is a work day. The first eligible man you're likely to meet will be that weasel-faced Doug Kelly."

"Weasel-faced? That's a terrible thing to say. Charlie, listen." Roxie put a hand on his arm. "It's sweet of you to take an interest in my love life, and I'm sure this Craddock man is very nice, but if he's like most wonderful men, he's already married, anyway."

"No, he's unattached at the moment."

Roxie gasped. "You asked him?"

"Subtly, of course."

"Charlie, you're about as subtle as a Mack truck. Listen, I don't care what your Mr. Craddock told you. I've learned that men don't always tell the truth in these matters."

"Hank wasn't lying to me. Not with that strong face and those capable hands."

Roxie decided the time had come for some revelations. "Charlie, wake up. I fell for a guy back in New Jersey who had the most trustworthy face you'd ever imagine. For three long years he convinced me that we couldn't get married because he hadn't achieved enough success with his business. Newark's a big city, and he almost got away with it, but one day by a wild coincidence I met his wife."

Charlie accepted the news with a sigh. He reached over and patted her hand. "I suspected that you'd been disappointed in love. So that's why you came here?"

"Yes, and I was lucky to have the chance. When I heard my parents' friends needed a house-sitter, or in this case a llama-sitter while they spent a year in the Orient, I jumped at the opportunity."

"You know, on the way to work Tuesday morning, to humor an old man, you could stop by the construction site, just for a moment."

"Charlie, give it a rest." She searched for another topic to make him forget his daydreaming about her and Hank Craddock. "Do you think anything's wrong with Como? Does she seem listless or is it just my imagination?"

Charlie snapped his fingers. "Yes, Como. I do know what her problem is. She's lovesick."

"Oh, Charlie." Roxie shook her head and poured cereal into a bowl. "You've got love on the brain."

"So does Como. She's a lonely llama."

Roxie chuckled. "Now that I think of it, Fran Osborn did mention that they'd tried to mate Como but nothing happened. She was too young. Maybe I'll get the vet out here, to make sure there isn't something we ought to know about the situation," she said.

She picked up the receiver of the wall phone in the kitchen and dialed the number.

When she'd finished talking, she turned to Charlie with a smile. "Looks like I won't be seeing Doug Kelly on the morning of St.

Valentine's Day. Dr. Babcock is free Tuesday morning and then he'll be out of town for two weeks, so I had to grab him when I could. I'll stay home from work that morning and go in at one o'clock."

A look of panic crossed Charlie's face. "What time is he coming over?"

"The appointment's for ten."

"Is this Dr. Babcock married?"

Roxie laughed. "I have no idea. Really, Charlie, aren't we carrying this a bit too far?"

Charlie mumbled as he reached for the coffee. "I'll take care of—that is, everything will be fine, just fine."

\*

ON TUESDAY morning Hank pulled into the circular drive. When no one answered the bell, he rang again and finally heard the front lock click. Then the heavy carved door opened and he was face to face with flame-red hair and eyes that were, indeed, the blue-green of the sea.

"So he did it," Roxie said. "He got you down here before the vet arrived."

Hank frowned in bewilderment. "Lady, I don't have the faintest idea—"

"Aren't you Hank Craddock?"

"Yes, and I was wondering if—"

"Charlie sent you down here, didn't he?"

"Yes, but I—"

Then she laughed. "You might as well come in, Mr. Craddock," she said, stepping back from the

door. "I'm afraid this is bigger than both of us."

"Listen, could I use your phone?" Hank decided to take charge before he found himself in the twilight zone. "The mobile phone in my truck went out and I have to change a window order."

"What a coincidence." Still smiling, she beckoned him into the house. "Sure, you can use the phone. The closest one's in the den."

He followed her down a tiled hallway and noticed that the top of her head came to his chin, making her about five seven. A nice height. The urgency of his business was beginning to wane. He liked the way she wore her hair, brushed back from her forehead on top, and luxurious, touch-me fullness at the sides and back. "You should have heard how Charlie talked about you," he blurted.

She flushed slightly. "You have to excuse Charlie. He means well, but he—"

"Underrated you," Hank shocked himself by saying. A quick glance at her left hand told him what he needed to know, and he began to imagine taking her out to dinner and maybe dancing.

Hank liked dancing although he was a little out of practice. In his dating years before he'd met Sybil, dancing had provided a socially acceptable reason to be close to someone and discover if her body fit with his. Just eyeing the situation Hank thought he and Roxie would dovetail very nicely.

"Have you ever tried country swing?" he asked. At her puzzled look he realized that he'd made a quantum leap forward in the conversation. "I—"

She smiled and laid a hand on his arm. "You don't have to ask me out, you know. Charlie probably begged you to, but don't feel under an obligation to save Roxie from weasel-faced Doug Kelly."

"Who?"

"Charlie didn't mention him and the St. Valentine's Day legend?" she asked.

"Look, all I know is that Charlie happened to be at the site when my mobile phone went out this morning, and he suggested I come down here to make my call."

"Which you haven't made yet," she reminded him gently.

"You're right. Charlie didn't mention my asking you out, but that doesn't mean it isn't an appealing idea." He decided to go for broke. "Would you like to sometime?"

"I—we'll see. Make your call."

"Okay." As he withdrew his wallet from his back pocket, he dropped it, spilling pictures and business cards on the Oriental rug under their feet. "Well, damn." He stooped immediately to retrieve everything.

"Accidents happen," she said, bending to help him.

"I haven't managed a stunt like this in years," Hank said. "Not since the night I was trying to use a fake ID to get a drink at the Wildcat House."

She didn't laugh or respond at all, and he glanced up in surprise. Then he stood and frowned in confusion as she silently handed him the stuff she'd retrieved. The friendly expression had completely vanished from her face and in its place was the blank stare of a woman who could have been in a scene from Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing that I wouldn't have expected, Mr. Craddock. You can lock the front door on your way out." She turned and left the room.

ROXIE WAS alone in the sunny kitchen when Charlie came in, all smiles and winks.

"What did you think of him?" he asked as if certain of the answer.

"He's a handsome devil, all right. He's married."

"He most certainly is not."

"Then how do you explain the picture in his wallet of him with a blond woman and two children that look very much like both of them? He dropped his wallet on the floor and I helped him pick everything up."

Charlie tapped his chin with his forefinger. "I can't believe that I'm wrong about this man, but let's find out for certain." He walked to the shelf under the kitchen telephone and took out the directory.

"What are you going to do?"

"Call his house and ask for Mrs. Craddock."

Roxie put down her mug and stood. "If you're really going to do this let me listen in on the extension."

"Just don't cough or anything, my dear, or the jig's up."

Roxie picked up the telephone receiver in the den and remembered that Hank's lips had been as close to the mouthpiece as hers were now. She'd seldom looked at a man upon first meeting him and wondered what his kiss would be like, but she'd done that today with Hank.

The phone stopped ringing and a woman answered. Charlie spoke with smooth confidence. "May I speak with Mrs. Hank Craddock, please?"

"There is no Mrs. Craddock," the woman said.

"I beg your pardon?" Charlie responded. "There must be some mistake."

"I think the mistake is yours, sir," the woman said. "You see, Mrs. Craddock passed away two years ago."

Roxie gasped and immediately clapped her hand over the mouthpiece. Then she gently lowered the receiver to its cradle without bothering to listen in on Charlie's apologies to the woman. Died! His blond wife in the picture had died! The thought had never occurred to her that someone so young...

Roxie bit her lip. Those poor children. In the picture they'd

looked small and vulnerable—still in elementary school.

"Does that answer your question?" Charlie leaned against the doorway of the den and gazed at her.

"I feel awful. After I'd seen the picture I was really nasty to him. He has to think that I'm a shrew."

"Perhaps I'll meander down there later today and repair the damage."

"No! I mean, that would seem so—oh, I don't know what to do. By now he probably thinks that both you and I are lunatics." She slumped to the leather chair and rummaged in the desk for paper and pen. "If you'll deliver it, I'll write him a note. I'll ask for forgiveness for my rude behavior, and I'll—I know—invite him to bring his children over for supper on Saturday night, to see Como. How's that?"

Charlie walked over to the desk. "You'll be fine with those children."

"Charlie, you're way ahead of yourself, here. But no doubt about it, some sort of apology is called for and dinner for Hank and his kids seems like the answer."

Roxie had written four versions of her apology-invitation note before she was satisfied enough to let Charlie take it down the street to Hank Craddock. By the time Charlie returned, carrying what looked like a piece of scrap lumber from the construction site, Roxie was waving goodbye to Dr.

Babcock as he pulled out of the circular drive.

She stood by the open front door and waited for Charlie to reach her. He handed her the two-foot length of pine. "This is your reply from Hank."

"The guy couldn't find paper?"

"I'd say he did quite well on short notice."

Roxie read the words out loud. "'I'll never be "board" with you. Be my Valentine.' What a terrible pun," she said with a grin.

Charlie took her elbow in a courtly gesture as they reentered the house. "It's been a good morning's work."

Roxie shook her head in amazement. "Anyone would think you engineered the whole thing."

Charlie settled into his favorite kitchen chair. "I certainly try. And while we're on the subject of sweethearts, how's our Como?"

"Well, you were right. Poor Como needs a boyfriend, but I'm afraid she'll have to wait until the Osborns get back. I'm a city girl, and even if the Osborns gave me the go-ahead, I'm not ready to play Cupid for a llama."

"Do you think the Osborns might approve such a course of action?" Charlie showed interest in the possibility.

"Charlie, now stop it," Roxie said. "Be satisfied with your human matchmaking, okay? That could get us in enough trouble without adding in llama love."

"But—"

"No, Charlie." She picked up the scrap of wood on the kitchen counter and waved it at him. "This is enough mischief for one day. End of discussion."

"Just remember that you're holding the most important valentine you'll receive today, perhaps ever. I hope you'll treasure it."

"Shall I sleep with it under my pillow tonight?"

"Perhaps."

"Charlie, I wasn't serious."

"Give yourself time, Roxie, and you will be."

\*

THE FAMILY portrait that greeted Roxie when she opened the heavy carved door was incomplete. She could almost see a dotted line drawn around the spot where Hank's wife should have been. Here stood the handsome, square-jawed father holding the hand of a little girl with a blue and lavender scarf tied over her brown hair. Next to them, close enough for security but far enough to establish his growing independence, was the blond, hesitant son. They had arranged themselves as if making room for someone else who had once turned the odd number to even.

Roxie felt the tug, the urge to fill that gaping hole herself, and knew that she couldn't be the only woman to have felt that way. She'd have to be careful, very careful, not to let that emotion influence her attraction to Hank.

"I'm so glad you all made it," she said. "Come in and meet Charlie Hartman, a dear friend of mine."

"These are my children, Ryan and Hilary," Hank said with obvious pride. "Kids, this is Roxie Lowell."

"Well!" Roxie began, rubbing her hands briskly. "Would you like to go straight out to the patio and see the llama before you take off your coats?"

"I would," Hilary said right away.

"Sure," Ryan added, but more casually. He was in training for adolescence, Roxie could see, and didn't want to appear childishly eager for anything.

Charlie stepped forward as if on cue, taking Hilary's hand in his. "I'll take them, Roxie, while you finish dinner preparations."

"I'll stay and help Roxie," Hank said. "You kids go on out with Charlie."

As simply as that, Roxie thought, as if they were in cahoots, Charlie and Hank had arranged things so that the valentine couple would be alone for a while.

"About the scarf," Hank said. "I hope you don't mind if Hilary eats her dinner with it on. She made me promise that she could. She...well, she had a little disaster with her hair. I swore to her that I wouldn't tell."

Roxie laughed. "Now I'm dying to know what she's done, but you're a nice daddy to keep your word. I won't pester you about it."

"Thanks. She'd be furious if I spilled the beans, and I'd pay the consequences for a long time. Hilary has a memory like an elephant and she doesn't forgive easily."

Roxie nodded in understanding. "I'm kind of like that, myself. That's why when I thought you were married, I—well, never mind."

She hung his jacket in the closet and ran her fingers lightly down the supple suede. "If we have our drinks in the kitchen I can finish my work and you can peek out the window to see how the kids and Charlie are getting along."

"I've never seen Hilary take a stranger's hand that quickly before. Did Charlie come with the house or something, like the llama?"

Roxie was extremely aware of Hank as he leaned against the counter. "I met him my first day at the county clerk's office." She paused to take the ice-cube tray out of the freezer.

"So Charlie works there?"

"No, but he comes in every day." She put ice in glasses and bourbon and filled the drinks to the top with water. When she started to hand one glass to Hank she drew it back abruptly. "This is stupid," she said, shaking her head. "I made this without asking you."

"I like it." Hank took the glass and waited for Roxie to pick up hers. "Follow your intuition where I'm concerned and you'll probably be right on target."

Logic hadn't governed anything she'd done concerning Hank Craddock, yet his presence here felt exactly right. "My intuition also tells me that I'm going to like you very much," she admitted.

"Mine tells me the same about you." He touched the rim of his glass to hers.

She acknowledged the toast with a nod and sipped her bourbon.

She made herself busy taking the roast out of the oven and finding a platter for it. "How're the kids doing?" she said in an effort to appear nonchalant and in control.

"Great. Ryan's leading Como, and Hilary's riding her. You still haven't told me who Charlie is."

She couldn't come up with any way to gild the lily. She turned to him. "Before I brought him to live in the guest house the night it snowed, he was living on a park bench downtown."

He gazed at her. "Really?"

"Yep." Roxie paused to sip from her drink. "When the snow came I was afraid he'd freeze to death on that bench, so I invited him to stay in the Osborns' guest house. He's been here ever since."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"He wouldn't hurt a flea, Hank. I've believed in him ever since I met him, which is ironic considering how illogical that is. Maybe I'm not as logical as I think."

"Maybe not." Hank looked pleased with the idea. "I'll sure never forget the first day I met him. There he was, an old English-looking gentleman leading a

llama. I thought I had some resident who was ready to burn my behind about the construction. Instead he complimented me on the job and implied that my name had something to do with it."

"I know. He's very big on names."

"Then he must have told you what yours means."

Roxie got out the flour for the gravy without looking at him. "He said that Lowell means 'beloved,'" she mumbled.

The back of Roxie's neck grew warm. She knew he was staring at her and she was afraid to turn around and catch him at it.

"According to Charlie my name means *abounding in love*. Tell me, what does Charlie think will happen if two people with names like ours meet on St. Valentine's Day?"

From the corner of her eye she could see that he was right beside her now. Summoning her courage, she glanced up at him. "Oh, he thinks we're destined for each other," she murmured, stirring the gravy.

He took a deep breath and put down his drink. "I wish that I'd known you a little longer, Roxie."

"Why?" she whispered.

"Because I'm going to kiss you, and Charlie or no Charlie, you'll probably think I have no business doing that yet."

The spoon slipped from her trembling fingers and landed with a plop in the gravy. Gently he turned her toward him and tipped her face up to his.

Heart pounding, Roxie closed her eyes and waited for the first sweet pressure of his lips. She felt the whisper touch of his breath and wound her arms around his neck. Just as his lips grazed hers, a screech from the backyard wedged between them and they reeled away from each other in shock. After one startled glance at each other, they raced for the French doors into the patio and almost collided with Hilary.

"My scarf came off," she wailed, pushing past them. "Don't look!" She charged down the hall and into the first room she found. Immediately she closed the door.

Charlie and Ryan came through the French doors discussing the incident between them.

"It wasn't my fault," Ryan said.

"Of course not," Charlie agreed. "You couldn't have known that Como would try to nibble on that scarf."

"I know," Ryan suggested. "We'll all pretend we didn't see her spotted hair because she was running so fast."

Hank gave Ryan an appreciative look. "That's nice of you to think of Hilary's feelings, but I think she's well aware that her secret's out."

"What *did* happen?" Roxie asked. "Did she try to bleach her hair?"

"I told her it was a dumb idea," Ryan said, taking off his jacket.

Roxie looked over her shoulder at Charlie and Ryan. "How would you guys like to finish setting the

table for me?" she asked. She quickly opened the refrigerator and took out the salad and dressing. "Hank, you can toss this while I talk to Hilary. That is, if it's okay."

"But I can't guarantee she'll be all sweetness and light." His gray gaze swept over her. "Listen, Roxie, there's something you should know. She wants to bleach her hair so she'll be a blond like her mother was."

"Oh." Roxie wondered if she was about to make a tremendous mistake getting involved.

SHE STILL wasn't sure when she exited the room hand in hand with Hilary. She practically ran into Hank.

"I was coming to see if you had fallen asleep," he said.

Hilary gazed up at her father. "We were talking," she said. "Later Roxie's going to talk to you about bleaching my hair." She dashed down the hall, her multi-colored hair flying behind her.

Roxie gulped.

ROXIE TRIED to explain when she and Hank went out for the after-dinner video the kids wanted.

"What if you told her she could be blond, but first she had to watch the whole process being done on someone else?" Roxie asked as he started the car. "I can't believe she'd still want to go through with it after about three hours of watching."

He glanced at her and smiled. "Considering that I'm getting this advice from logical, practical Roxie, perhaps I ought to listen. Let me think about it. In fact, I appreciate your sharing the load on this crisis. It's lonely at the top," he said reaching for her hand as they entered the shop.

They toured the aisles quickly, hand in hand. After a few minutes Hank took a family comedy from the shelf. "This'll do," he said, as he led Roxie to the checkout counter.

Hank was silent as he tossed the movie into the back seat and wheeled the Lincoln out of the parking lot.

A short distance later he swerved the car into the vacant cul-de-sac of a new housing development and cut the engine. He drew her slowly into his arms. In the darkness she couldn't see his expression. Was he as solid as he seemed, or was he a rogue under the clean-cut exterior he allowed her to see? She'd been a terrible judge of character three years ago. What made her think she was any better at it now?

His lips slowly merged with hers, with a sureness that made her quiver.

The exhilaration of kissing him wiped away her fear of risk and replaced it with a need she dimly recognized. Was it possible that the passion she'd found so difficult to renounce six months ago had been only a weak forerunner of real desire? Dazed and disbelieving, she looked into his face as he lifted his

head and shook it once, as if to clear his vision.

"I guess Charlie knew what the hell he was talking about," he muttered.

It was just a kiss, she told herself. Charlie's predictions have worked you into a fever pitch of anticipation. This will seem different in the light of day. But she didn't really believe any of that.

"I've...just been through a bad experience," she found herself saying. "That was the main reason I moved out here, to...to recover."

He turned to her. "Do you still love him?"

"No."

"Because I'd hate to think you were kissing him instead of me."

"I wasn't," she said, gazing at him. "Who were you kissing, Hank?"

He touched her cheek. "You. Only you. And if we don't start the car I'll do it some more. When can I see you again? Are you free Tuesday night?"

Her pulse raced. "Yes."

ROXIE SPENT Sunday morning on her hands and knees cleaning the kitchen floor. She sat back on her heels and looked at Charlie.

"All in all I'm quite pleased with my work," he said, almost to himself. "Now, if we could solve poor Como's problem."

"Charlie, I've warned you about tampering with Como's love life. She's fine."

"Come and look out the window and tell me she's fine," he said, holding out his hand to help her up.

Roxie peered out the window. "She's looking over the corral fence. That's all she's doing."

"She stands like that for hours. She wants a sweetheart," Charlie insisted. "You said the Osborns took her somewhere once, the time she wasn't old enough to breed. Was that the direction they went, do you suppose?"

"Charlie, we are not getting involved in this. I promised to feed and brush and talk kindly to this llama. I agreed to clean her stall and put down fresh straw. I never said I'd play Cupid."

"Wouldn't it be lovely to do that, though?"

"No."

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ON TUESDAY night Roxie discovered that the destination for their date was The Last Territory Steakhouse. The hostess led them past a barrel filled with unshelled peanuts and over to their table. The red-and-white-checked tablecloth was anchored in the middle by a knobby red glass container with a candle inside.

The waitress appeared and they both decided beer was the appropriate drink for a night among the cowboys.

"To broken telephones," Hank said, raising his glass to hers. "Without those we might never have met."

"To broken telephones," Roxie repeated, tapping her glass against Hank's and raising it to her lips.

Hank took a large swallow and put down the glass. "Let's dance," he said, holding out his hand to her. The band was playing a ballad about love gone wrong, but Hank refused to be superstitious. The song didn't matter as much as the chance to hold Roxie again.

As they reached the dance floor she snuggled against him as if they'd been dancing this way for years.

He cradled her head against his chest and laid his cheek on the pillow of her bright hair while they slowly circled the floor with the other dancers. He rubbed the small of her back and heard her sigh of pleasure. How he wished that everyone else in the room would disappear.

The music ended, and he reluctantly eased away from her. The beat picked up and several dancers began the shuffling step used in country swing.

Roxie watched several couples glide by before shaking her head. "I can't do that," she said.

"I'll teach you," Hank said, catching her around the waist and bringing her close.

He guided her through the simple steps and gloried in the way her eyes shone and her cheeks flushed.

ROXIE GAZED into the intense gray of his eyes and knew that she was falling in love.

They were standing outside in the cool air. Hank put his arm around her shoulders. "Feel like taking a drive?"

She looked at him and wondered how to say that she longed to cuddle in his arms in a secluded spot away from the rest of the world. "We could take a drive," she said hesitantly. "Whatever you like."

He turned to face her. "Listen, I don't know how you'll react to this, but I... reserved us a room. Here. It was only a thought." He frowned. "Forget it."

Her mind swirled. "No," she whispered, running her fingertips along his jaw. She began to tremble. "Oh, Hank, please don't think of me as less than a lady for wanting you, too, so soon."

His kiss was sweet and lingering, a promise of what was in store when they were alone.

"There is... one thing," she said. "I didn't seriously consider that we'd—I'm not prepared for this. I don't take birth control pills anymore," she finished in an embarrassed rush.

He smiled. "No problem."

Roxie sighed with relief as he guided her to the room.

"ROXIE, my God, Roxie," he mumbled, pressing his lips against her throat and running his hands with firm pressure over every part of her body. "I want to memorize you. I want to learn you the way a blind man learns Braille. I want to

know everything there is to know about you, Roxie."

She moaned as he cupped her breast and brought it to his mouth. The rhythmic suction of his tongue and lips transmitted a pulse beat through her until she throbbed with longing. With sure hands he caressed her belly, her thighs, and at last the moist center where her need for him had become an unbearable ache.

He settled his lips against hers, absorbing her whimpering cries. She writhed against him, and as her movements grew more frenzied he slowly withdrew and moved over her.

The velvet strength of him entering her at last was all she needed to propel her over the edge. Her hips lifted and she gasped for breath as the undulations rippling inside shook her whole body. A roaring filled her ears, almost blocking out his tender murmured words.

She entwined her legs with his and held on tight as he buried himself in her again and again. At last, with a cry, he surged forward one last time and shuddered in her arms.

Something about him made her crazy with desire, so crazy that she could think of nothing but this wild surging together, this celebration of physical love. Something, however, wasn't quite what she'd expected. And then she realized what it was. Where in their passionate exchange had he taken care

of birth control, as he'd assured her he would?

Hank stirred and lifted his head to look down at her. "Fantastic," he said. "You're wonderful."

"So are you," she replied, tracing his lower lip with her fingertip. "Um, I do have one tiny question, though. You promised to take care of the uh, protection."

He chuckled. "I didn't explain all that very thoroughly, did I?" he said, kissing her gently. "I'm out of the baby business."

She stared at him and tried to assimilate what he was saying. He couldn't have children anymore?

"Sybil and I decided after Hilary was born that two kids were enough, and the operation was far simpler for me than for her. Roxie, is something wrong?"

"No, of course not." She managed a smile.

"Something's changed, though, Roxie." His gaze roved over her face. "I can feel it."

She swallowed. "All right," she said, taking a deep breath. "The thing is, Hank, I love children and always expected to have some of my own." She blinked back tears.

"Roxie," he said, cupping her face in his hands, "Hilary and Ryan are still children, you know."

"I know." *But they're not mine,* she wanted to add. Hadn't she warned herself about becoming the person who filled in the missing space in this little family?

Gently he stroked her back, and they were both quiet for a long time. When he finally spoke, it was

with a sense of wonder in his voice. "I love you, Roxie," he said. "Lord help me, I already love you."

Roxie closed her eyes. Loving Hank meant dealing with two half-grown children and apparently giving up hope of having her own. This wasn't the way she'd planned her life at all, and yet...

AT HOME the next morning Roxie quieted the voices that reminded her that she'd never teach a toddler to walk, or record a child's first word, or rock her baby to sleep. Life was full of choices, and she couldn't expect to have everything, she reminded herself as Charlie joined her in the kitchen.

Charlie winked at her knowingly.

"Charlie, you're impossible." Roxie's face grew warm as she remembered being in Hank's arms only hours ago. "I have a couple of favors to ask of you."

"Anything at all."

"Hank has asked me out on Thursday, and I wondered if you'd look after Como for me?"

"It would be my pleasure. What was the other favor you wanted?"

She wondered if she could ask him, when the question would reveal the exact nature of her relationship with Hank. Maybe he would object to the responsibility.

"Don't be shy, Roxie. What is it?"

"Um, it's about the weekend." She glanced at him furtively. "Hank's children will be away at

their grandparents', and he wondered if I—"

"Certainly," Charlie interrupted, sparing her further explanation. "Young lovers need more than a stolen moment. I'll take care of everything here." His lined face creased in a smile. "Don't worry about a thing."

ON THURSDAY night Hank arrived in jeans.

"Let's go," he murmured. "The past couple of days have seemed like an eternity. I have a picnic hamper in the back with some wine and some goodies from the deli."

A thrill of anticipation traveled through her as they drove toward an expensive housing development. He then turned down a dirt road that ended at a house half-hidden in a grove of mesquite trees.

"Where are we?"

"A good friend of mine is building this house and hopes to sell it for a lot of money. But Ed trusts me and also owes me a few favors, so he said the house was mine for the evening."

"Your friend knows why you wanted the key?" In the darkness Roxie flushed.

"He's a good guy, Roxie. When I told him I'd met a lady, he slapped me on the back and said, 'It's about time.' He said that giving me the key made him feel like Cupid."

She turned in her seat to look at him. "He hasn't been talking to Charlie, has he?"

He smiled. "Not that I know of."

Hank opened the door and helped Roxie out of the car and into the house. Their steps echoed as they walked through a tiled foyer.

Hank led the way down three carpeted steps to the sunken living room and over to a beehive fireplace. He set the wicker hamper on the raised hearth and turned to her. "What do you think?"

She gazed up at the beamed ceilings. "I like it. This house has an atmosphere of caring in it."

"That's right." Hank spread a blanket in the square of moonlight coming through the floor-to-ceiling picture window. Then he took her hand and pulled her down beside him. "The perfect atmosphere for loving you," he said gently, easing Roxie back on the blanket.

She cried out and writhed against the blanket as he loved her. Again and again they came together, each time more explosive than the last.

He lost count of how many times he told her he loved her until at last he tightened his arms around her and rolled them both to their sides, facing each other. "I love you," he said again. "I can't think of anything more important to say than that."

"And I love you." Her voice was husky. "There isn't anything more important to say."

He gazed at her for a long time. "There might be one thing more to add."

"What?" she asked softly.

"Marry me."

She didn't answer him.

"Maybe... maybe you're not ready for that question."

"Hank, I—"

"No. Never mind." He placed a finger across her lips. "You love me. That's enough for now. Don't think about the other yet."

ROXIE DID THINK of it, though. She thought of his proposal almost constantly the next day, because she'd almost said yes.

Hank was everything she wanted in a husband and lover. But for Roxie the word *marriage* had always been paired with the word *family*. Hank's family came ready-made, with no additions allowed. She'd have to become an instant mother to Ryan and Hilary and give up the notion of her own baby, or more exactly, hers and Hank's baby. That idea was tough to relinquish, because Roxie believed that having a baby together was an important way for two people to express their love.

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HANK BROUGHT his daughter to Roxie's house by eight Saturday morning and turned Hilary over with such confidence that Roxie was touched. He'd agreed to let Hilary watch the bleaching process and make up her own mind.

"How long will I have to watch this other lady get her hair bleached?" Hilary asked as she

and Roxie drove the short distance to the beauty shop.

"Georgia, my hairdresser, said it could take two and half or three hours." Roxie glanced at Hilary belted in beside her. The blue and lavender scarf, its original beauty obscured by days of playground dust, was knotted under her chin. She was a determined little girl, but Georgia had assured Roxie that the process was sufficiently obnoxious to discourage Hilary from having it done.

And it was. Part way through the process Hilary gazed at Georgia with wide eyes. "Phew, it stinks!" Hilary said, holding her nose.

"That's ammonia," Georgia explained. "We need something this strong to take all the color out."

"I didn't know it would stink so bad." Hilary covered her mouth and nose with cupped hands and breathed into them while she watched Georgia work with growing anxiety. "How much longer?" Hilary asked.

"At least another hour," Georgia said.

Roxie tossed Hilary the next piece of bait. "How long does the semipermanent hair color take to apply, Georgia?"

"If someone sits very still, I can have that person out the door in thirty minutes."

"Yes!" Hilary said, jumping up from the chair. "It stinks too bad in here!"

Under cover of Georgia's amused chuckle, Roxie sighed with relief. The plan had worked.

A SHORT TIME later she heard giggles from Hilary and exclamations of pride and wonder from Georgia.

"I'm ready to go now," Hilary declared and paused dramatically beside the cash register counter.

"My goodness, how beautiful you are," Roxie said. Georgia had not only returned Hilary to her original color but given her a shorter cut that emphasized her large gray eyes. The longer hair, in a style similar to her mother's, had been wrong for the shape of Hilary's face.

"And I'm not even blond," Hilary responded proudly. "I can hardly wait to show Dad and Ryan!" Hilary lost her regal poise and jumped up and down. "They won't believe I look so good. Then I get to show my grandma and grandpa."

On the ride home Roxie kept glancing at Hilary, who really didn't look like the same child. When they reached her house Hilary raced across the gravel driveway toward her father. "Daddy, Daddy, see how beautiful I am now!"

Hank swung Hilary up in his arms and smiled at her. "You've always been beautiful."

"You sure look different, Hil," Ryan said as he joined them.

"But good, huh, Ryan? Don't I look good?"

"Yeah, I guess so. You look good with short hair."

"I know." Hilary beamed at everyone.

Hank lowered his daughter to the ground and Charlie escorted the children around to the side patio gate to where Como was penned.

When they were gone, Hank walked over to Roxie and rested his hands on her shoulders. "Thanks." He looked deep into her eyes. "You did a hell of a job with this mess."

"I—thanks." She flushed with pleasure.

His grip tightened. "And now that the hair business is over, I can hardly wait to drop these kids off at their grandparents' house."

HANK USHERED her in through a door that led to a spotless kitchen in a blue-and-white country decor. It was tasteful and welcoming, but Roxie had the urge to pull down the curtains patterned with cows and geese and replace them with Mexican serapes.

"What do you think?"

She turned to find Hank watching her. "Honestly?"

"Honestly." He set her overnight bag on a kitchen stool.

She met the assessing look in his clear gray eyes and knew that she couldn't fool him into believing that she felt at home here. She was in another woman's house, confronted with another woman's tastes. He must have seen that as quickly as she had.

But as she studied his face and wondered how to answer his question, the importance of the decorating scheme faded. Who cared what a room looked like when it contained this man? Slowly she took off her coat and walked over to him. "I think," she said, "that it's been a very long time since you kissed me."

"An eternity," he agreed, wrapping his arms around her, his mouth moving hungrily over hers.

Finally he lifted his head, and when he spoke his voice was rough with desire. "I've never loved you in the daylight."

"No."

"I think I'll like it very much."

He led her to the master bedroom.

Loving him completely, every bit of him, was the most natural thing in the world. Her body soon sang in tune with his. When they were joined she moved without thought, as effortlessly as breathing, as sure of his body as she was of her own.

Their climax was sure and swift, the end to a dance with no missteps. It left her weeping with joy.

"Hush," he crooned, kissing her salty tears. "It's all right. Hush now, love."

"So beautiful," she sobbed. "We're so beautiful together."

"Yes." He kissed her trembling lips.

"I don't want to waste that beauty," she said, tears still wet on her cheeks. She took a ragged breath. "I want to have your baby."

He became completely still. After a moment he gazed down at her. "I can't give you that."

"The operation... could be reversed."

His silence pushed between them, a gray intrusion upon their joy. "There are no guarantees with that, Roxie," he said with careful emphasis.

"At least we'd have a chance," she said, her gaze pleading.

He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against hers. "Oh, Roxie, don't ask this of me."

Despair crept through Roxie. "You don't want to try reversing the operation?"

"No, I don't." Hank rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. "I have two children, and that's plenty in this day and age, with the cost of everything from orthodontia to college. Besides that, I've been through diapers and 2:00 a.m. feedings, and colic and chicken pox."

"Not even—" She paused to swallow the lump in her throat. "Not even if you knew how much it would mean to me?"

"Roxie, listen." He raised himself up and turned onto his side, propping his head on his hand. "If you marry me, and I hope to God you do, you'll have your hands full with Hilary and Ryan. We'll spend more time together, the four of us. You'll see how complete a life we'll already have. We don't need a baby."

"We don't? How can you speak for me?" Her despair curdled into

anger. "You've had your chance to hold a newborn child. You've seen their first tooth and heard their first word. Don't you understand? I want the chance, too," Roxie said, moving away and leaving his bed. "Obviously I misjudged the situation. I thought the only thing standing in the way of our having a baby was an operation that you had before you knew me." She reached for her clothes.

"Roxie!" He swung his legs out of bed and stood beside her, magnificent in his nakedness. "Making the adjustment with Hilary and Ryan will drain us enough without adding the complication of a baby."

"I have a feeling," she began, fighting back tears, "that no adjustments will be necessary."

"Roxie, don't crucify us on this issue."

"Why not?" Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. "The problem won't go away, Hank. I want a baby."

"More than me?"

His image blurred as tears flooded her eyes. "I don't know. Maybe—maybe I do," she choked out.

"I can't believe—" Hank's sentence was interrupted by the ringing of the bedside phone.

"Answer it, please," Roxie said, buttoning her blouse with shaking fingers. "This discussion is over, anyway."

He glanced at her before walking over to the telephone and picking up the receiver. He spoke to the

person briefly and then turned to Roxie. "It's Charlie. He sounds upset."

*Join the group,* Roxie thought. Reluctantly she took the receiver from Hank. "Charlie? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, Roxie, my child, I feel dreadful about this, just dreadful. You were right; I should have rested on my laurels once I brought you and Hank together."

"Charlie, what is it?" Alarm swept through her like a brush fire.

"It's Como. She's... gone."

AT HOME Roxie found an old book of addresses and telephone numbers in the study. She asked Charlie to try them all and find out if any of the Osborns' friends knew where they'd taken Como to be bred. And the vet. Maybe he had information about it.

Charlie's lined face looked older than ever before. They left him with the number of the truck's mobile telephone in case he discovered through his calls where Como might be, and they also promised to call Charlie immediately if they found the llama.

"According to Charlie, the last time he saw her she was headed west on Sunrise Drive, right?" Hank asked Roxie as they drove away from the house.

"Yes. I hope she didn't stay on it, though. The traffic is—" She couldn't finish the sentence as a picture of Como dodging Saturday-afternoon traffic flashed into her mind.

Hank said, "We'll assume she turned off on a side street and continued west that way."

Hank shifted down so they could take the drive at a slow enough pace to look for any signs of Como. Roxie examined the street.

"Wait, Hank, there!" she said at last. "The entrance to that exclusive development, with all the flowers and the waterfall. She might have been attracted by the waterfall, don't you think? She could be thirsty."

"It's an idea. Maybe the guard at the gate has seen something."

The guard became very excited when they mentioned a white llama. "So that's what it was? I saw this animal come trotting in here as if it owned the place. When it stopped to drink at the waterfall I tried to catch it, but it took off across the golf course."

Roxie clutched the dashboard of the truck as Hank stepped on the gas, calling a quick thanks to the guard.

"Hank! I see a flash of white!" Roxie cried a few minutes later.

"Get a bead on her. Aren't there some houses over there where she's headed?"

"Yes, there are. Could one of those places be her destination?"

"Let's hope."

They started in the direction of the houses. When the mobile phone rang, Hank picked it up and spoke briefly with Charlie.

"We're on the right track," he said to Roxie after he hung up.

"Charlie's located the people with the male llama, and from the address I'd say they live somewhere in that cluster of houses."

By the time they arrived at the address Charlie had given them, a Mrs. Griffith was standing next to a well-tied Como and stroking her neck. Como seemed oblivious, however, as she touched noses with a handsome black llama on the opposite side of the tall rail fence.

"Will you look at that," Roxie said. "Charlie was absolutely right."

"So, are you going to let the lovers share the same pen tonight?" Hank raised an eyebrow in her direction.

"No, I'm certainly not. I don't want the responsibility of a pregnant llama. Too many things could go wrong."

He stopped the truck and turned to her. "I feel much the same way about you having a baby."

Roxie opened the door of the truck. "It's all right, Hank. You've stated your case. But I don't have to agree with you. I appreciate your help in finding Como, but after we get home, we won't be seeing each other again."

THE TASK of returning Como to her corral and retrieving Roxie's car took very little time. Within an hour everything was accomplished and Hank had left. Roxie had tears in her eyes.

Charlie hurried to her side. "Roxie, my child, please tell me

what's wrong," he said, putting a hand on her arm.

Determined not to cry, she began brushing Como vigorously. "I guess Hank won't be my valentine, after all," she said.

"Why ever not? You two were getting on so famously."

Roxie tried to clear the lump from her throat. "Charlie," she said tremulously, "do you consider having a baby an expression of love between two people?"

"Why, I suppose it can be, Roxie."

"What do you think of a man who refuses that experience, even when...he knows that the woman he loves wants a b-baby very much?" With a sob Roxie put her arms around Como.

"Oh, my dear." Charlie patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Maybe Hank needs time to get used to the idea."

She lifted her damp face and turned to him. "I never want to see him again!" Once more she buried her face against Como's neck, and the llama nuzzled her shoulder as if to comfort her.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear." Charlie sighed. "Maybe I'm through. Maybe I've lost the old touch, the savoir faire to do this job. Retirement's been suggested, but I've been stubbornly clinging to my motto that Love Conquers All, but now I just don't know."

Roxie lifted her head and wiped her eyes. "Charlie, what on earth are you talking about? Retire from what?"

"My job, of course." He took out his handkerchief and polished the gold pin on his lapel. "I was so certain of you and Hank. The two of you had restored my faith in the wonder of true love. But now . . ." He shook his head sadly. "I hate to end my career with a failure."

Roxie faced Charlie. "End what career? Who are you?"

He swept off his hat and gave her a courtly bow. "St. Valentine, in person and at your service."

Roxie stared at him incredulously. "My God, you *are* crazy," she whispered.

"That's possible, after all the centuries I've been handling this assignment. I've been thinking of training a younger assistant." He gazed morosely at the flagstone pattern beneath his feet. "Now that may not be necessary."

"An assistant," Roxie marveled. "I'd love to be there when you ask someone to take that position."

"There are those who have already asked," Charlie said with great dignity. "Geoff Chaucer for one. He was perceptive enough to notice that birds pair off on February fourteenth. However, I rather favor Charles, the Duke of Orleans. What a fellow. When he sent his wife a love letter from the Tower of London on St. Valentine's Day, he started a whole new trend."

"A real trendsetter," Roxie said, deciding to play along with this amazing fantasy. He was abso-

lutely, totally crazy. Yet she still loved him.

Charlie shifted. "I may just have to consider retirement."

"And then what?"

"I don't know." Charlie stared at his hands.

"You could stay with me. You know that."

He glanced at her. "As if I really were Charlie Hartman, you mean?"

"Yes." She nodded solemnly. "As if you really were Charlie Hartman."

"I'll give it some thought." Charlie held out his lapel and peered down at the gold pin. "If I retire, I could sell this."

"I've always meant to ask you about that pin, Charlie."

"It comes with the job. It's a love knot. When I successfully complete a project, I give this pin to the lucky couple and get another. There's an endless supply of pins as long as I'm successful, but—" He paused and shrugged.

Roxie wondered why she was asking questions, as if it mattered what he said. But participating in Charlie's craziness took some of the ache from her heart.

AS IT TURNED OUT, the Osborns called and announced they were flying home early. They told Roxie that she was welcome to stay in the guest house as long as she liked, at least until she had enough saved to work out a deal on a condo or town house.

"I am moving back to the park tomorrow," Charlie announced when Roxie told him that the Osborns would return on a flight the next evening. "The weather is delightful now, Roxie. The bench won't be a bad place at all."

"Oh, Charlie." Roxie sighed, knowing that his decision was final. She tried to ignore the depression that was settling over her and growing more dismal with every passing minute. First she had pushed Hank away, and now Charlie was leaving.

Roxie felt drenched in sadness. Charlie had been living in a dream world, and for a short time, so had she. In the real world love was not enough to overcome life's problems.

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THE RETURN of the Osborns gave Roxie something she hadn't enjoyed since leaving Newark—a trusted woman friend in whom to confide.

Fran and Roxie had planned to spend the afternoon fertilizing and pruning the citrus trees. The fragrant air hung still and silent, except for the hum of bees gathering nectar from the orange and grapefruit blossoms. Even Como was gone, transferred for the week to her sweetheart's corral. Roxie had told Charlie about Como's changed status, and he was happy for the llama, but nothing, Roxie knew, could ease his disappointment concerning Hank.

As she and Fran worked, Roxie searched for a way to begin a discussion of what was bothering her. "You and Dave seem so happy, so in love," she said. Roxie pulled out a weed from the tree well and tossed it aside. "Fran, tell me if this is too personal, but did you ever consider...having children?"

Fran answered at once. "I couldn't have them, although we went through a truckload of doctors before that conclusion was finally drawn."

"What about adoption?"

"We moved around too much," Fran said, clipping branches as she talked. "And in the end we decided to give up the whole desperate game of baby-makes-three." She stopped pruning and looked at Roxie. "Kids are nice, but they seldom stay around, you know. It's the person you'll be married to for the next fifty years who counts." She studied Roxie for a moment. "And now I get to ask you a personal question. Who is he?"

Roxie's mouth opened in surprise.

"Just as I thought. Are you going to tell Aunt Fran about it?"

Roxie leaned on her shovel. "Yes," she said, gazing at Fran. "I've been wanting to for days."

The story rushed out like water into a dry irrigation ditch. Roxie told Fran everything, including the parts about Charlie and his claim about being St. Valentine, and Como's escape.

"Whew!" Fran said when Roxie had finished. "China wasn't nearly that exciting." Fran put down her clippers and walked over to hug Roxie. She eyed her shrewdly. "I suppose the only way to keep Charlie in business is for you to patch it up with your Mr. Craddock."

"Even if it means giving up my dream of having a baby?"

"But what sort of dreams are you giving up now?"

Roxie was silent for a long time. The drone of the bees was the only sound in the sunny patio as Roxie thought about her choice. "I'd rather have Hank and no baby than no Hank at all. I love him, Fran. More than anything or anyone else." She took a deep breath. "And I'm not going to let this baby business come between us."

"That's my girl. Go get him, Roxie."

"I believe I will."

And Roxie tried, but no one answered the telephone at Hank's house. She called again every half hour until ten o'clock that night.

She debated whether to call again and finally decided to dial the number once more at ten-thirty. Hank answered the phone.

"Roxie?" he said as soon as she spoke. "Is anything wrong?"

"No," she said, trembling at the sound of his voice. "I need to talk to you. In person. I wondered if maybe we could...get together sometime. Sometime tomorrow." She swallowed hard.

His reply was swift. "I'll pick you up at ten." There was a pause. "You know I'd walk on hot coals for a chance to be with you again, Roxie."

THE NEXT morning Hank arrived exactly at ten. To cover her bad case of the jitters at seeing him again, Roxie dragged him immediately into the kitchen and introduced him to Fran and Dave, who looked up from their Sunday paper with a bemused expression.

"It's wonderful to meet you," Fran said. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Thanks," Hank said, glancing at Roxie, "but we'd better be going."

"Uh, yes, we'd better," Roxie said. She rushed out the front door before she made a blubbering fool of herself by falling into his arms and begging him to marry her within hearing distance of Dave and Fran.

As they drove she noticed little things that she'd missed before. The shape of his earlobe, the small mole on the curve of his cheekbone, the breadth of his hands—all were precious to her now. She hoped that he still loved her enough to forget her harsh words of two weeks ago.

"We're going to the house, aren't we?" She recognized the route to the house his contractor friend was building, even though they'd traveled it at night before.

"Yes."

When they turned down the winding drive, she quelled the unbidden feeling of homecoming.

Roxie's appreciative gaze roamed over the graceful lines of the Santa Fe-style house. Everything about it enchanted her, from the huge carved double entry doors to the round log beams that protruded from the stuccoed exterior. New leaves sprouting on the mesquite trees would soon shield the house from the sun and create a cool haven in the desert.

Engrossed in her thoughts, she didn't realize that Hank had left his seat until he opened her door and helped her out.

He stood silently beside her, surveying the house. "Like it?" he finally asked.

"Yes," she said, afraid to admit to more.

"I put a deposit on it this morning."

Her gaze flew to his and her eyes widened.

"And if you like this house, I mean really like it, I want us to live here—you, me, Ryan, Hilary—I told the kids I want to marry you—and of course, Charlie." He paused. "And the baby."

Disoriented, she shook her head and tried to assimilate all that he'd said. "The what?" she whispered, putting her hand over her heart.

"I went to see the surgeon last week, and he's ready to try reversing the operation whenever I say."

She struggled with a light-headed feeling of unreality, of moving through a dream. "I have

my little speech all ready about how I've discovered that you are more important than having a baby, and now you're telling me—"

"That I was wrong," he said, stepping forward and taking her into his arms.

"Wait a minute." This might be a dream, she thought, but she'd say her piece anyway. "I've thought this through and spending my life with you is far more important than whether I ever have a baby."

He smiled and stroked her cheek. "I got out the old albums, the ones we put together when Ryan and Hilary were small. Looking through them, I realized those were special times. You deserve that experience, and I deserve to have it with you."

Slowly she began to believe in the moment, in what he was saying. "You really have changed your mind," she said in wonder.

"Yes. I wasn't around nearly enough for the other two. I want full participation with this one. Let's schedule the baby during the slow season in construction, okay?"

Her joy overflowed and she smiled at his earnest, impractical request. "I don't think it's quite that simple."

"Sure it is. I'll get Charlie to work some of his St. Valentine's magic."

"Oh, Hank, Charlie will be thrilled with this news. He won't

have to retire, after all. We have to tell him tomorrow."

Hank pulled her close. "We'll take him to lunch when I come downtown for the license. In the meantime, I have other plans. Some old man once told me that I was abounding in love, and it's been frustrating keeping that bottled up the past two weeks."

"I wouldn't want you to be frustrated, Mr. Craddock."

"Good," he murmured, finding her lips and claiming the kiss that was undeniably his.

ROXIE COULD hardly wait for Charlie to arrive at the county clerk's office with his red rose Monday morning. When he walked in, his smile a ghost of the jaunty grin he'd once had, her heart ached for him.

She hurried toward the counter as he arranged the single rose in the vase. "Hello, Charlie."

"My, but you look wonderful this morning," he said, taking off his hat and laying it on the counter.

"I should," she replied, anticipating his delight. "Hank and I are applying for a marriage license today."

Disbelief transformed itself into ecstasy on Charlie's lined face, and Roxie accepted his hug of congratulations with breathless laughter.

"A more delightful surprise I've never had. I thought all was lost."

"Just when I had decided that Hank was more important than having a baby, he was deciding that we should have a baby, after all."

"How delightful. Each of you willing to sacrifice for the other. Will you have the baby or not?"

"Hank insists that we'll try," Roxie said, lowering her voice as she became aware that others were listening. "But even if we can't have one, I don't mind anymore. I'll have Hank."

"And because you don't need this child so much, you'll have one," Charlie predicted.

"Perhaps." Roxie smiled. "We're buying a new house, Charlie, and we'll all live there, even you."

Charlie's blue eyes twinkled. "You're too kind, Roxie. I don't know what to say."

"Just say yes. The wedding's in two weeks. Oh, and we're taking you to lunch today, right after we settle the license business. We'll meet you at your bench."

Charlie reached for her hand. "I wish you and Hank all the happiness in the world, Roxie."

Roxie squeezed his hand. "I know you do."

At the door he tipped his hat in her direction. "It's been a pleasure, my dear."

"See you at twelve-thirty," Roxie called, waving. Then she forced herself to tackle the paperwork that seemed so unimportant today.

Hank arrived at noon, and by twelve twenty-five he and Roxie were walking hand in hand toward the park.

Hank looked around as they reached the park. "I don't see him.

I thought he'd be here with bells on."

Across the park, a city maintenance man stopped emptying trash cans and looked at Roxie and Hank. Then he left his job and walked toward them. "You Charlie's friends?" he asked when he was within calling distance.

"Yes." Roxie hurried forward.

"He asked me to give you this."

He took a crumpled envelope from his back pocket. "Said he was moving on. Well, excuse me, but I have work to do." The man left.

Roxie glanced pleadingly at Hank, who was standing quietly beside her. "He wouldn't just leave, without saying goodbye, would he?"

With trembling fingers Roxie tore open the envelope and almost dropped the figure-eight gold pin that fell out of it. "Oh, Charlie," she murmured, holding the pin. "You did say that you gave the love knot away at the end."

"At the end of what?" Hank asked.

"At the end of each job as St. Valentine."

"Roxie, are you saying that you think he's really—"

"I really don't know what to think. Let's read what his letter says."

Together they scanned the brief note.

Dear Ones,

My work here is finished and I must prepare for my next adventure in love. I leave you

knowing that your future together is bright, for you have been blessed by the special magic of St. Valentine's Day. For a brief while I feared that the spell no longer worked, but now my faith is restored and I must continue my journey. Give my love to Como.

My fondest regards,  
St. Valentine (Charlie Hartman)

Slowly Roxie folded the letter and tucked it back in the envelope. "I don't know what to believe," she said, gazing up at Hank.

"I do." His gray eyes were warm with affection. "I believe that Charlie Hartman, whoever he is, gave me the chance to love a wonderful woman, and thank God I didn't blow the chance. Whether Charlie is really St. Valentine doesn't matter anymore. Our love is real, and that's all that counts."

He put his arm around her and led her away from the park.

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"MUST BE NICE," the driver of the eighteen-wheeler said, "to pick up and go whenever you want. Not a bad life, old man."

"No, it isn't a bad life," Charlie agreed. "But you're mistaken about the schedule. I do have one. By September I have to create a base of operations, locate and find suitable people."

"What you got, some sort of con game going on?"

"Heavens no, young man. My purposes are purely philanthropic. But everything must proceed on schedule. I can't afford to miss my all-important deadline."

"What deadline?"

"Why February fourteenth, of course. It's the most important day of the year for lovers." Charlie leaned back against the seat and smiled. "Still."





**ROBIN  
ELLIOTT**  
**To Have  
It All**



Brant Adams had been faster than a speeding bullet on the football field. But he'd have to learn a brand-new playbook if he wanted to win Jenna Winter's hand in marriage....

“T a-da!” Jenna Winter said, flipping a bright red chiffon scarf around the mannequin’s neck. Not bad, she thought. The white satin dress, matching shoes and the final touch of the scarf definitely had a Valentine’s Day flair. Great work.

Jenna spun around as a sudden shifting of light caught her attention. She frowned as she saw that it had been nothing more than a passing car. It was disconcerting to be decorating the window display at Randell’s in plain view. The heavy blue velvet drapes that usually shrouded the enclosure were at the cleaners, and Jenna felt like a goldfish in a bowl.

Not that anyone was looking at her, she thought ruefully. People were not strolling along the Los Angeles sidewalk at seven o’clock on a Sunday morning.

Jenna again caught a flicker of motion out of the corner of her eye. Glancing over her shoulder, she found herself staring down at a man who stood on the sidewalk. He was absolutely...gorgeous. A thick crop of silver-gray hair fell to the collar of his shirt. His face was deeply tanned and rugged, with dark, almost black eyes. He looked vaguely familiar.

Reaching into a box, Jenna pulled out two long strands of

beads, one red and the other black. Holding them in either hand, she placed them against the white blouse, cocking her head to one side as she studied the effect. Her attention was drawn again to the window by the man waving his arms in the air. She looked at him inquiringly and he pointed to the strand of red beads. He gave her a thumb’s-up and grinned.

Always please the customer, Jenna thought, as she arranged the necklace.

“Finished,” Jenna said, her eyes sweeping over the completed display. “See you guys in a month on the day after Valentine’s. Behave yourselves.”

On impulse she waggled her fingers goodbye to the man and was rewarded with another one of his dazzling smiles. Turning, she placed her hand on the knob and twisted it. Nothing. Jenna tried the knob again, this time leaning her slender five-foot-five-inch frame against the door.

“It’s stuck!” she gasped.

Jenna gave the door a swift kick that did nothing more than bring a yelp from her lips. Wonderful, she thought. Just wonderful. The store didn’t open until noon on Sunday and it wasn’t even eight o’clock.

Luckily, the man was still there. Jenna grabbed her clipboard and wrote a message, dropping to her knees and turning the board in his direction.

Sweet heaven, Jenna thought. Her face was directly opposite the man's, the glass panel the only barrier between them. The dark pools of his eyes seemed to hold her in place. Her heart did a strange little staccato beat as a tingling sensation danced along her spine.

A slow, lazy grin crept on to the man's face. He nodded, then suddenly placed two fingers in his mouth as he spun around, gesturing with his arm at the same time. She looked up in confusion and groaned as she saw a police car pull up to the curb and two uniformed officers leap out. The man had obviously issued a shrill whistle to gain their attention.

The man gestured at her with his thumb, causing the policemen to glance briefly in her direction. She pointed urgently to her sign only to be ignored as the three men suddenly launched into an animated conversation that resulted in everyone shaking hands. Then, to Jenna's wide-eyed amazement, the officers pulled out pads and pens and the silver-haired man wrote on each, returning the paper with a friendly smile.

What was going on?

The three men suddenly seemed to remember why they were assembled and turned to look at Jenna, who tossed them a stormy

glare before scribbling another message. She gave instructions to call Barry Teel, the manager of Randell's. The taller of the two policemen saluted sharply, causing Jenna to roll her eyes in disgust.

The policeman slid behind the wheel of the patrol car and spoke into the radio.

The silver-haired stranger wandered back to the window. She gave him what she hoped appeared to be a slightly bored expression and found herself the recipient of a very sexy wink and a broad smile.

It seemed ages before a car pulled up at the curb. A man nearly fell over his feet in his haste to get out. Jenna's blue eyes danced with merriment. Was this the ever-proper, three-piece-suiter, Barry Teel? He looked like he was still half asleep.

Barry spoke to the silver-haired man and, damn it, there they went, shaking hands and smiling. Who in the world was this man? Barry finally disappeared into the store and Jenna pushed herself to her feet.

"Jenna, for crying out loud," Barry said as he swung the door free, "how did you manage to get yourself locked in there?"

"It wasn't my fault," she said, scooping up her supplies and stepping carefully down the stairs. "It wouldn't budge."

"Yeah, the tumblers are shot," Barry said, jiggling the knob. "I'll put your stuff upstairs and make

some calls to see if a locksmith will come out on Sunday."

"Okay, thanks. See ya, Barry."

Jenna unlocked the front door, stepping out into the crisp January air.

"Safe and sound?" a deep voice asked, causing Jenna to jump in surprise.

"Yes, thank you." She smiled. "I appreciate your calling in the marines."

"I was raised to assist ladies in distress. You did a nice job on that window, by the way. Could I buy you a doughnut and coffee?"

She didn't even know this man, but it *had* been a nice gesture on his part to stay put until she was rescued. "All right." She smiled. "There's a café just down the block. I'm Jenna Winter."

"Hello, Jenna Winter," he said, taking her elbow. "I'm Brant Adams."

Brant Adams? Brant Adams? Jenna thought, as they started off down the sidewalk. Lord, he was... "*The Silver Bullet*," she said.

"That's me," he chuckled, the resonance deep.

"The football player."

"The ex-football player."

"No wonder the police and Barry were impressed."

"And you're not?" he asked, smiling down at her.

"Oh. Sorry. Should I swoon or something?" she laughed, the lilt-ing sound dancing through the morning air.

"Well, you could sigh or bat your lashes at least. My ego is being shattered."

"I doubt that," she said as she preceded him into the coffee shop.

"First customers of the day," the waitress said. "What can I bring you?"

"Coffee and doughnuts," Brant said. "So, Jenna Winter," Brant said, sitting down and folding his arms across his chest, "have you always had that dusting of freckles across your nose? They're cute. You're cute. No, more than that, you're lovely. Is your hair naturally curly?"

"For heaven's sake," Jenna laughed, "slow down."

"The Silver Bullet? Come now, Miss Winter, my claim to fame is being very fast on my feet. It is Miss, isn't it? You're not wearing any rings."

"I'm not married. And you have a reputation as a playboy, or so say all the gossip columns."

"Pack of lies." Brant smiled, as the coffee and doughnuts were set in front of them. "What else do you know about me that I should deny?"

"Well, let's see," Jenna said, tapping her chin with her fingertip. "You are, or were, a fantastic football player. Your announcement a few weeks ago after the Flames won the Super Bowl was a shock to everyone in the sports world. Why did you retire, Brant?"

"It was time," he said quietly, taking a sip of his coffee.

"But you're only thirty-four, and according to all the reports you had some good years left."

"Nope. Is it?"

"Is what?"

"Your hair naturally curly?"

"Yes. Are we changing the subject?"

"Not at all. We were talking about you in the first place. You are cute and pretty Jenna Winter, who decorates store windows and gets locked in on occasion."

Jenna absolutely could not get a breath of air, and a funny noise roared in her ears. Brant's voice had dropped an octave lower as he spoke and it seemed to rumble up from the depths of his soul, stroking her like a velvet glove. Lord, this was the Romeo of the gridiron, Mr. Charm-'Em-and-Bed-'Em of the Los Angeles Flames. Who did he think she was? One of his groupies?

"Let's pretend you didn't say all that nonsense," Jenna said, a slight frown on her face.

"Okay," he said finally. "For now, that is. Have you worked at Randell's long?"

"About three years. After I graduated from UCLA, I did freelance work and nearly starved. It's great to be in one spot now. What about you, Brant? Do you have new plans since you've retired?"

"Some."

Some? Jenna thought. What kind of answer was that? "Why is it I'm blabbing on about myself and all you're giving me are one-syllable answers?"

"Because you're more interesting than I am." He smiled.

"Oh, yes, of course I am." She laughed. "Little ole window dresser me versus great big football star you."

"Ex-football star."

"I stand corrected, Mr. Silver Bullet. You were nicknamed that because of your hair, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. My hair turned this color while I was in college. It's a hereditary thing, runs in the family. It's also been referred to as sexy."

"Do tell."

He flashed her an engaging smile. "Say, Jenna, do you want to get married right away or should we live together for a while? I, for one, vote for the wedding bells. We'll have matching rings. And babies. I love 'em. You like kids, don't you? Sure you do, I can tell. Jenna, your mouth is open."

"Oh," she said, snapping it closed. The man must have forgotten to put his helmet on a few times when he played. "You know, Brant," she said, "one woman is going to take your blithering seriously one of these days, and you're going to find yourself at PTA meetings."

"Are you saying you won't marry me?" he said, sitting bolt upright.

"Not today. I have to go to the grocery store."

"Okay. I'll go with you," he said, sliding out of the booth.

"Don't I have anything to say about this?" Jenna asked as she got to her feet.

"Sure. You get to pick the store," he responded, dropping a bill onto the table.

Outside, Brant casually wrapped his arm around Jenna's shoulders and pulled her to his side as they walked along. She was, Jenna decided, not playing with a full deck. This was Brant Adams, the Silver Bullet, who had been linked with so many gorgeous women over the years it would take a scorecard to keep them all straight. And he wanted to go to the grocery store with Jenna Winter? Cute and pretty Jenna, when he could have his pick of glitter and glamour and the Hollywood set? It definitely did not make sense. Brant was in the major leagues. He was the big time, the fast lane. He operated on a different plane with a separate set of rules from those of Jenna's world.

"You should wear blue all the time, Jenna. That sweater matches your eyes perfectly. You really do have beautiful eyes."

He just didn't quit!

Inside the market, Brant commandeered a cart and Jenna pulled a list out of her purse.

"Say, let's get some Oreo cookies. I love Oreo cookies. And milk. You have to have milk with Oreo cookies."

Jenna glanced up at Brant. He was serious! He was actually all charged up over cookies and milk!

His eyes were dancing and he had a little-boy smile on his face.

Jenna left Brant examining the packages of Oreo cookies. She picked up orange juice, peanut butter and flavored tea before wandering back in his direction.

"Sign mine next, Bullet," a young boy was saying, waving a paper in the air.

"I'll get you in a minute, buddy." Brant smiled as he continued to write his name on a wide variety of items that were pushed at him from about ten noisy boys.

Jenna stood back and watched. Brant looked directly at each of the youths as he returned their papers, speaking to them individually. The boys were literally glowing, basking in the attention from their hero.

"See ya, Bullet." "Thanks, Bullet." The youths sang out as the throng dispersed.

"Here, give me that," Brant said, taking the items from Jenna's arms and placing them in the basket. "I got my cookies before the troops hit."

"Those boys were so excited to meet you."

"Yeah, I seem to impress everyone but you, Jenna Winter." He smiled. "You haven't asked me for my autograph, a lock of my hair, my body—nothing."

"Don't hold your breath," she said, laughing.

Brant insisted on paying for all the groceries, saying they could settle up when they got back to Jenna's. Those almost diabolically

compelling eyes of his locked with hers in one of those timeless gazes and she agreed to his plan with no hesitation. Oh, Lord, she was crazy.

Jenna's apartment was on the fifth floor of a high-rise complex opposite a pretty park. The rooms were small, but cheerful. Brant nodded in approval before following her into the yellow-and-white kitchen and helping her unpack the groceries.

"Where's the register receipt so I can add up what I owe you?" she asked.

"I've never bought a woman peanut butter and cinnamon tea before. You wouldn't rob me of a new, awesome experience, would you?" he said quietly, cupping her face in his large hands.

In almost detached fascination, Jenna watched as Brant slowly lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers in a motion as light and fleeting as that of a butterfly's wing. Jenna's hands crept up to his neck, inching into the silver thickness of his hair. His tongue sought entry to the sweet, inner darkness of her mouth and she complied. Lord, he felt good, Jenna thought dreamily, and tasted good. He seemed to be wrapping her in a protective shroud within the safe confines of his strong, muscle-corded arms.

"Oh, Jenna," Brant said, drawing a shaky breath, "you are a very, very desirable woman."

"Brant, I—"

"Too soon, too fast." He smiled, stepping back from her. "I know that. But, oh, Jenna, we are going to be fantastic together. Do you know what we are going to do this very minute?"

"I...well, no, I..."

"Have milk and Oreo cookies!"

WHEN HE WAS gone, she sank onto the sofa.

"What's going on?" she said aloud. "Just what am I doing?" How dare Brant pounce all over her and... Oh, who was she kidding? She was the one who had returned his kiss. Disgraceful, that's what it was. So what if she thought she'd died and gone to heaven when Brant was kissing her? Yeah, so what?

Jenna gathered her wash and headed for the basement where she spent the next two hours in the laundry room, reading a thick novel to the accompanying hum of machines. Her clean clothes neatly put away, she made herself a cup of cinnamon tea. That Brant had bought. At the store. With her.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Jenna said, flopping onto the sofa. "This is ridiculous."

Jenna wiled away the afternoon watching a basketball game on television, but found it hard to concentrate. The image of Brant Adams crept into her mental view when she least expected it. She could see that thick crop of silvery hair, the dark eyes, the rugged,

tanned planes of his handsome face.

She grumbled, "I'll probably never eat Oreos again without thinking of him."

When the telephone rang at five o'clock, Jenna stared at it for a moment and then snatched it up.

"Hello, Jenna Winter," the deep voice said.

"Brant?" she said, knowing she was smiling.

"I forgot to ask you something. I know you couldn't marry me today because you had to go to the store, but how about tomorrow?"

"I can't." She laughed. "I have to work."

"Well, damn. How about dinner tonight, instead?"

"Tonight? I . . ."

"I know a cozy little Italian restaurant. Seven o'clock?"

"Yes, that will be fine," she found herself saying.

"Good. Bye. Oh, don't get locked in the bathroom or anything in the meantime."

BRANT WHIPPED the sleek automobile through the traffic and Jenna wondered absently if he'd chosen the silver color to coincide with his nickname.

"Are you from L.A. originally?" he asked.

"San Jose. I stayed on here after I graduated from UCLA. And you?"

"I'm a native son of this fair city. I go into smog withdrawal if I'm away too long. Tell me about your family."

"Father, mother, seventeen-year-old brother. Kevin is a Flames fan through and through."

"The kid has good taste."

"Where is your family, Brant?"

"Here, there and everywhere. It's hard to keep track. There's the restaurant. Wait until you taste this spaghetti sauce. It's fantastico," he said, kissing the tips of his fingers.

The restaurant was small and cozy, with candles on tables covered in red-and-white-checked tablecloths. They were descended upon by a short, round woman who seemed to materialize out of thin air.

"Brant!" The woman beamed. "Oh, my darling boy. It's been too long since you've come to see me. Maybe now that you've given up getting beaten to death every Sunday you'll come more often."

"Indeed I will. Mama, I want you to meet Jenna Winter. Jenna, this is Mama Crocetti."

"Hello." Jenna smiled. Mama Crocetti looked exactly like an Italian mother. Her gray hair was pulled into a tight bun and she had a warm smile.

"Ah, you are such a pretty thing," Mama said to Jenna, "and you must be very special. Brant has never brought a girl here before. Come. I'll get you some wine," she said as she sat them at a table in front of the roaring fire.

"The atmosphere is marvelous," Jenna said as Mama hustled away to get their wine, "and you were welcomed like a member of the family."

"The Crocettis are very important to me," Brant said. "I don't share the Crocettis easily, but I wanted you to meet them."

"I feel very honored, Brant."

Mama reappeared with a bottle of wine. "You drink this," she said, filling their glasses, "and have a toast to the future. I'll bring your dinner in a few minutes."

"I always do as Mama tells me," Brant said, lifting his glass. "To you. To me. The future. Ours."

Jenna touched her glass to the rim of Brant's. He was looking at her with one of his long, mesmerizing gazes. Jenna drew a shuddering breath as she forced herself to tear her gaze from Brant's.

"Jenna?" he said quietly. "What's wrong?"

She managed a weak smile. "I wish I'd never read things about you in the paper, Brant. It would be so much easier if you were a total stranger."

"I can understand that." He nodded. "The Silver Bullet has a helluva reputation as a womanizer. I am asking you to trust me because it's very important that you do. I want a chance to prove to you that I'm not the unfeeling cad I've been set up to be."

"Spaghetti!" Mama Crocetti said, placing steaming plates in front of them. "You eat every bit. Did you toast to the future?"

"Yes, ma'am." Brant smiled.

"Good," she said, pinching his cheek. "Now toast to babies. Eat! Eat!"

"She always does that," Brant frowned, rubbing his cheek. "It hurts."

Jenna laughed, and they began to devour the scrumptious spicy food. The conversation was comfortable, although Jenna couldn't help but notice that Brant made no reference to his youth or his family, and she had the irrational thought that he had dropped out of the heavens as a full-grown man decked out in a football uniform.

"I can't eat another bite," Jenna said finally.

"The Crocettis are the best," Brant said. "Let's go say goodbye. I hope Mama doesn't pinch my cheek again."

Not only did Mama Crocetti pinch Brant's cheek, she did the same to Jenna's, then hugged them both.

Jenna rubbed her cheek and laughed. "You're right. It hurts," she said.

Brant chuckled as they left. The stars twinkled their hello as they stepped out into the crisp air, and Jenna welcomed the warmth of the car as she slid onto the plush seat.

"So what's on your agenda at Randell's tomorrow?" Brant asked as he maneuvered the automobile through the traffic.

"The baby department has a sale starting. I'll redo the display."

"Ah, babies." Brant smiled. "We never did toast to them. Did you know that whenever you see a falling star it means an extra-special baby has just been born?"

"Oh, really?" Jenna smiled. "I would imagine that every child is special to the people it belongs to."

They rode the remainder of the distance to Jenna's apartment in silence, Brant suddenly seeming to be lost in his own thoughts.

At her apartment, Jenna turned to smile at Brant, who stood just inside the door.

"I had a lovely time, Brant," she said.

"I'm glad, Jenna. Very, very glad."

The kiss that came in the next instant was soft and sensuous, and Jenna literally melted into the hard contours of Brant's body. Tongues met, and she could hear the pounding of her heart as it roared in her ears.

Suddenly he released her, causing Jenna to stagger slightly.

"Good night," Brant said, his voice strained. "I'll talk to you soon. Sleep well."

"Yes" was all Jenna managed to say as Brant turned and left. The apartment seemed strangely silent, empty and cold without him.

\*

SHE WAS BUSY STUFFING a small plaster foot into a pair of fuzzy green pajamas the next morning when a deep voice spoke close to her ear.

"I came to buy a baby. You said they were on sale," he said, smiling down at her from his lofty height.

"Well, certainly, sir," she smiled. "How many babies would you like?"

"Oh, about a half dozen. But I want them to have shiny black curls and big blue eyes. Know where I might find babies like that?" Brant asked, his voice low and slightly husky.

"I..."

"Have lunch with me."

"I have an awful lot to do."

"You have to eat, Jenna."

"Yes, all right."

"Good. See you later. I'm telling you, Jenna, you'd better put some diapers on that kid. Bye."

Jenna watched until Brant had disappeared from view. His long, easy stride carried him along as if he didn't have a care in the world.

BRANT WAS greeted by name by the beaming manager of Captain Hook's, and they were shown immediately to a quiet corner. Brant then agreed to sign his name to a half dozen menus before they at last were able to place their order for lunch.

"Don't you get tired of everyone clamoring over you?" Jenna asked.

"It goes with the turf." He shrugged. "People will forget me soon enough now that I've retired."

"Do you think you'll miss the notoriety?"

"No," he said, reaching over to take her hand. "What we're building here is special. We are going to have it all. I know you don't be-

lieve me yet, but you will. 'Oh, good, here's lunch. I'm starved.'

'Have it all? Jenna thought. What did that mean, for Pete's sake? Brant was like a cyclone, swirling in and swishing out again.

"Say, can you take the day off tomorrow and marry me?"

"No," Jenna said, bursting into laughter. "Brant, you are so crazy."

"Hey, Bullet," an enormous man said.

"Howdy, Smoke," Brant said. "Say hello to my Jenna."

"Hello, my Jenna," Smoke said. "Listen, Bullet, word is getting around the team that the coach is moving Smith into your spot instead of Donny Wood. He's mad as hell, threatening to walk out on his contract."

"He's a fool if he does," Brant said. "Donny should just clam up and wait and see."

"Do you think you could see Donny and try to calm him down?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll go by his place."

"Great. Well, nice meeting you, my Jenna. When you get tired of ugly here, give me a call."

"Goodbye," Jenna said as Smoke headed across the room. "He's the biggest man I've ever seen," she said to Brant.

"That's no joke. That guy can go through three packages of Oreo cookies without coming up for air."

"The stuff of which heroes are made." Jenna laughed. "Good-

ness, look at the time. I've got to get back."

On the way back to Randell's, Brant stopped in front of the window and blew a kiss to the mannequins, causing Jenna to dissolve into a fit of laughter. She was still smiling after she waved goodbye to Brant.

At home that night, Jenna changed into jeans and a sweatshirt and had a salad for dinner. She missed Brant. She wanted to see him, inhale his special male aroma, hear his laughter, share his smiles.

Jenna reached for the telephone and dialed her neighbor's number.

"Priscilla here."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm scheduled to work a flight to London next week. How's life, kiddo?"

"Beautiful. Confusing."

"Pour me a drink. I'm coming down."

When Priscilla arrived, Jenna told her about the dinner at the Crocettis' restaurant, lunch that day, and Brant's endless stream of statements regarding their relationship.

"Goodness, you're coming unglued."

"Well, Brant is muddling my brain. Priscilla, look at his track record. It says models, movie stars and L.A. high society. I'm not his type."

"Jenna, can't you just have a marvelous affair with Brant and chalk it up for a wonderful time?"

"No." PROHIBITED

"Lord, you're not falling in love with him, are you?"

"I'm teetering."

"Uh-oh, you're in trouble. I don't think falling in love with him would be such a red-hot idea."

"There is no vaccine invented to prevent it, Priscilla."

"Sure there is. A lovely affair that lasts until you get him out of your system. Look, I've got to go home. I'm going out with a pilot who's flying in from Chicago. Jenna, take an aspirin and go to bed. As for falling in love with Bullet Adams, I wouldn't recommend it. I do not, however, know how you'll stop it if it happens. I'm immune to the disease myself. Cheorio."

Well, so much for Priscilla having all the answers to her predicament, Jenna thought. An affair or an aspirin. Jenna would take the aspirin.

When the telephone rang at ten-thirty, Jenna counted slowly to five before answering it, priding herself on her restraint.

"Hello, Jenna. I hope I didn't wake you," Brant said.

"No."

"Listen, there'll be a picture in the paper tomorrow of me and Victoria Shane, the actress. We were at a civic-group meeting. The photo is going to be a killer. She practically crawled inside my shirt. I'm sorry but there wasn't a hell-uva lot I could do about it. Her manager set it up. Victoria is one pushy lady and...Jenna, I want to make sure you understand about

that picture. Victoria was all over me and...I had to be certain it wouldn't cause any problems between us."

"Oh, my," Jenna said quietly. "Thank you for telling me, Brant."

"Then everything is all right? You'll see the picture and know it wasn't my fault?"

"Yes."

"Terrific," he boomed. "You have no idea what that means to me, Jenna. I want you. I need you, too. I'll never do anything to hurt you, Jenna Winter. I swear I won't."

Brant needed her? Oh, what an incredibly beautiful thing for him to say.

"Just trust me, Jenna," he said, his voice hushed. "Give me time to prove to you that I'm sincere."

"Yes. Yes, I will, Brant."

"Don't go out with anyone else, okay? I couldn't stand the thought of that. Please, Jenna, be mine, only mine."

"All right, Brant."

"Good night, babe," he said.

"Good night, Brant."

"Sleep well."

Sleep well? Jenna thought as she sat in the quiet room. Lord, what had happened! She had agreed to see no one but Brant. That's what she'd done all right.

THE PICTURE of Victoria Shane and Brant was in a column entitled "What's Happening," and Jenna groaned when she saw it the next morning. The movie star had

literally adhered herself to Brant, but still had managed to present a full view of her ample bustline to the camera. The caption stated that Brant had been the guest speaker at the charity affair and that Victoria was his extremely attentive companion for the evening.

"Too bad, Victoria," Jenna said, a lovely smile on her face. "You lose. Go slither up to someone else."

Jenna's project that day at Randall's was in the housewares department. She found herself very alert to the passing crowd and realized she was watching for Brant.

There was no sign of him.

At home that night she headed for the kitchen, glancing quickly at the silent telephone. After a tasteless meal Jenna stretched out on the sofa and fell asleep.

A ringing noise awoke her and she groped in the darkness for the telephone. Snapping on the light, she reached for the receiver, her eyes widening as she glanced at her watch and saw that it was after midnight.

"Hello," she said foggily.

"Jenna? Brant. I know I woke you and I'm sorry. I was planning on seeing you tonight, but I ran into a small problem."

"Problem?" Jenna said, finally wide awake.

"I wanted to explain before you saw it in the paper."

"Again? What did Victoria do? Follow you all over town?"

"Who? Oh, no, it has nothing to do with her. You see, there was a

bit of a misunderstanding and I sort of landed in jail."

"What?" Jenna shrieked.

"Now, honey, don't get excited. Remember when Smoke said Donny was all shook up because he'd lost the starting position on the team? Well, it was just a rumor. I went to tell him everything was fine and finally found him in a bar, totally blitzed. He was in an argument with a couple of big dudes. Donny threw a punch, and all hell broke loose. The next thing I knew we were all being dragged downtown to the clink."

"You weren't hurt, were you?"

"Bruised, that's all. My lawyer has gotten everything straightened out. Anyway, Jenna, the press was there and—"

"You wanted to explain it to me first."

"Right."

"Oh, Brant," Jenna said, laughing, "you're exhausting."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm lovable. Promise you won't get upset when you see the paper?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Great. I've got to go take a shower. Will you have dinner with me tomorrow night?"

"Fine, Brant."

"Night, babe. Sorry I woke you."

"Good night," Jenna said. "Do try to stay out of trouble."

Good grief! Jenna thought, hanging up the phone and heading for the bedroom. It would simplify things if he just told her to

cancel her newspaper subscription altogether.

\*

BRANT'S sleek sports car weaved in and out of the traffic on Wilshire Boulevard.

"Oh, I saw Smoke today. He said to say hello to you. He calls you 'my Jenna' as if it were your name. But he was just kidding about you looking him up. He's devoted to his family. I am godfather of his four-year-old daughter. Now there's a beautiful little girl."

"You really do like children, don't you?" Jenna smiled.

"Yeah, I sure do. I hope you're not starving to death. I'm going to make you dinner and we have a ways to go yet to get to my place."

"Where do you live?"

"Bel-Air," Brant said, naming one of the exclusive sections of West Los Angeles.

"Snazzy."

The Santa Monica Mountains were shadowed against the sky as Brant drove off the main thoroughfare and into a residential area that edged Bel-Air. He pulled into a high-rise apartment complex and parked in a spot with a number painted on the curb.

"Home," he said, leading her through a back entry and into an elevator.

On the eighth floor Brant unlocked a door, flicked a light switch and stepped back for Jenna to enter, shutting the door behind them.

"Oh, Brant," she said, her eyes sweeping over the enormous living room, "it's beautiful." Jenna moved forward slowly, her shoes sinking into the deep-pile, chocolate-brown carpeting. A huge sofa covered in a plush, doeskin-colored material was surrounded by heavy, dark, hand-carved tables and easy chairs upholstered in vibrant orange. Floor-to-ceiling windows afforded a view of the Santa Monica Mountains and the twinkling lights of the foothills below. Everything was large, appropriate for a man of Brant's size, and Jenna decided it suited him perfectly.

"Well, you sit down at that table and I'll bring you some dinner."

Jenna did as she was instructed, nearly hypnotized by the beauty of the mountain scenery beyond the window.

"Your meal," Brant said, placing a plate in front of Jenna and depositing a fork, knife and spoon next to it.

"Chinese food! Did you really cook this?"

"In a manner of speaking. I cooked it in the microwave to warm it up after bringing it home from Wong's Chinese Takeout."

"You are a fraud!" she said, taking a mouthful of her meal. "This is delicious."

They ate in silence for several minutes, and then Jenna took a deep breath and a large swallow of wine.

"Brant," she said, "where is your family? And don't say you lost track of them or something vague like that."

He rose abruptly from the table and stood facing the windows, his hands shoved into the back pockets of his jeans. Suddenly he drew a shuddering breath.

"Jenna," he said, his voice strangely quiet, "anyone who has pressed me on it thinks they're dead."

"What happened, Brant?"

"Nothing fancy," he said, sitting down opposite her. "They were divorced when I was seven and there was a wingding custody battle. You see, Jenna, neither of them wanted me and they were each trying to force the other to be responsible."

"Oh, my God," Jenna whispered.

"My mother was an artist, and didn't want a pesky kid in the way. My father worked as a journalist for the foreign service and flitted all over the world. Me? I was a slight slipup in birth control."

"What did the judge say?"

"He split me in half. Six months with each. My parents solved it easily enough by sticking me in a boarding school. I got a football scholarship to Stanford and the rest is history. I have neither seen nor spoken to my parents since I was eighteen years old. As far as I'm concerned, Jenna, they really are dead. And buried. Forever."

"Oh, Brant, I'm so sorry. You must have been so lonely."

"I made up my mind never to count on anyone other than myself. I can't live like that anymore."

"Brant..."

"When I have a wife and family I'm going to give my kids everything I never had, and my wife will know she's the center of my existence. I want out of the limelight, so I can have a chance for a quiet, normal life. Okay. There I am. Brant Adams, the man. Lonely as hell."

"I don't know what to say," Jenna said softly.

"You could say you'll marry me," Brant said, looking directly at her.

"What?"

"You're everything I've dreamed of, Jenna. Marry me, Jenna. I'll give you everything, anything you want. What more do you want me to say?"

"That you love me!" Jenna said, tears spilling over onto her cheeks. "That's missing from the picture, Brant."

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "My mother used to sign her cards with love when she was a month late for my birthday. Hell, I'll tell you fifty times a day that I love you if that will make you happy."

"You don't understand. Love isn't just four letters that create a word. It's a state of being. Oh, Brant, saying it won't make it true," Jenna brushed the tears from her cheeks and looked at him. He appeared tired, defeated.

Jenna got up and walked to Brant, wrapping her arms around his waist. He turned and pulled her tightly to his chest, burying his face in the fragrant cloud of her dark curls.

"I'm not...sure I have any more to give you than what I've already offered."

"We'll see," she said, smiling up at him. "There's a page in your playbook you forgot to read, Bullet Adams, but we have plenty of time to figure it out."

JENNA SKIPPED lunch the next day so she could leave early and stop at the grocery store. She was cooking dinner tonight. She set the table with a linen tablecloth and placed candles on either side of a small bouquet of fresh flowers. The delicious fragrance of the baking food permeated the air when she answered Brant's knock at the door just before seven.

"Hello!" she sang out.

"Hi," he said, kissing her quickly and handing her a bottle of wine.

"Thank you," she said, deciding he was beautiful in dark slacks and a green sweater, his hair a glowing, silvery mass on his handsome head.

Brant raved on and on about the fine cuisine over dinner, and Jenna was literally glowing under his lavish praise. He ate two helpings of everything and raised his wine-glass in a salute.

"We'll have dessert in a few minutes," she said finally. "I've

invited a friend of mine to join us."

"Who is it?"

"Priscilla Hamel," Jenna said. "She lives upstairs. There's the door. It must be her."

Jenna opened the door and her mouth, but absolutely could not speak. She just stared at Priscilla, who winked at her before swooping into the room. The dress that Priscilla almost had on was a flaming red-satin creation that was slit to her waist, exposing a healthy view of her ample bustline.

"Hello, darling," Priscilla said, kissing the air next to Jenna's cheek. "Oh, and you must be the Silver Bullet. I can't tell you what a thrill it is to meet you, Bullet."

"Call me Brant." He smiled, a flicker of amusement dancing through his dark eyes.

"Yes! Well!" Jenna said, amazed that she was able to speak. "Do sit down and I'll get some dessert."

"Marvelous," Priscilla said, linking her arm through Brant's. "Shall we?"

He nodded solemnly, walking with her and sinking onto the sofa with Priscilla right next to him.

"Here we are," Jenna said, bringing a tray into the room and setting it on the coffee table. Her eyes widened as she saw Priscilla's nearly bare leg pressed against Brant's body.

"So, tell me, Brant," Priscilla said, "what are your plans now that you've retired from the Flames? Have you thought of

going into the movies? You're terribly handsome, and with your connections with Victoria Shane..."

"Who?" Brant said, concentrating on his dessert.

"Victoria Shane," Priscilla said. "You had your picture with her in the paper the other day, remember?"

"Oh, *that* Victoria." He nodded. "Jenna told me I can't see her anymore so... that's that."

"I did?" Jenna said.

"Well, gosh, Jen, don't you recall how you said you'd punch me if I stepped out on you?" Brant asked. "She's a real wildcat, Priscilla. Yes, sir, she keeps me on the straight and narrow. I tried to tell her not to get so excited because of her condition, but she freaked out anyway."

"What condition?" Jenna shrieked.

"Oh, I'm sorry, honey," he said. "I thought you would have told your best friend about the baby."

"Baby?!" Jenna said, jumping to her feet.

"Well, I'm sure Priscilla will keep our little secret." Brant's shoulders began to shake, and a moment later he laughed until tears came to his eyes. Every time he looked at Jenna's and Priscilla's astonished faces he dissolved again.

"What is your problem?" Jenna finally yelled.

"You two are something else," he gasped. "Man, what a show. I love it. Did I pass the test?"

Priscilla laughed. "It was my idea, Brant. Jenna didn't know. She is my best friend and well, you are the Silver Bullet, and..."

"You were seeing if I would succumb to the first luscious temptation that strolled under my nose."

"I do apologize, Brant," Priscilla said. "I guess I'm a little protective about Jenna. She's..."

"A very rare, very special lady," Brant said, looking directly at Jenna.

"I'm going to cry," Priscilla said, leaning over and kissing Brant on the cheek. "I'm also going to have you cloned so I can have a Silver Bullet, too. Well," she said, getting to her feet, "I can't even breathe in this dress, let alone eat. Ta-ta, all," Priscilla said, waving breezily as she headed for the door. "You're a lucky duck, Jenna."

Brant shook his head before getting to his feet and wrapping his arms around Jenna. "I meant what I said. I do love you. I may never comprehend love the way you do, but I'm trying, babe. I got rid of the hate in me, but it left a blank space. I want to fill it with love."

"Oh, Brant, I love you so much," Jenna said, tears clinging to her lashes.

"You've never said that to me before," Brant said, his voice choked with tenderness.

He claimed her mouth in a kiss that was urgent in its message of need. He pulled her tightly against him as she molded herself to the rugged contours of his frame. The heat that emanated from Brant's body seemed to sear through Jenna's clothing to ignite a rambling flame of passion that swirled within her. She sank her hands into Brant's thick, silver hair, urging him closer.

"Jenna, I want you so much," Brant said, taking a shuddering breath. "Tell me to leave before I..."

Jenna looked up into the deep pools of his ebony eyes. She saw desire reflected there, and warmth and tenderness. A soft, lovely smile came to her lips.

"Stay, Brant," she whispered.

SHE STOOD before him in naked splendor, and his breathing quickened as his eyes raked over her delicate form.

"Oh, Jenna, you are so lovely," he said, his voice hushed.

In a swift motion Brant lifted Jenna into his arms and laid her on the cool sheets. Then, in a languorous journey, he kissed and caressed her lissome body until she was moaning softly. His lips came to rest on her breast, his tongue flicking the nipple into a taut bud before he drew it into his mouth. His hand slid to the warmth of her inner thigh and on to the heated core of her femininity.

"Brant," she gasped. "Please, Brant!"

He answered her plea by moving over her and consuming her with a thrust that brought a gasp to her lips. He began the rhythmic motions that were matched instantly in perfect synchronization by hers. In a maelstrom of swirling, rising passions they soared higher and higher, each calling to the other as they neared the place they sought.

Then with wave after wave of tempestuous sensations they were there, bursting upon the shore like the crescendo of a symphony.

He collapsed against her and she relished his crushing weight. "I feel so...so...wonderful."

"Me too, my Jenna. You're really mine now. We'll work everything out, you'll see."

Brant drifted off to sleep as Jenna snuggled closer to be enveloped in the heat emanating from his body.

Oh, how she loved him, she thought dreamily. She would fill the void, the emptiness within him. He would learn to give totally and receive and trust in kind. It would happen. It just had to.

Jenna's thoughts quieted and, like a contented child, she closed her eyes and drifted away.

BRANT STILL had his head buried under the pillow the next morning as she dressed for work. Jenna felt a stirring of desire deep within her as she gazed at him, remembering the ecstasy of their union.

Reluctantly, she wrote him a note telling him to have a nice day

and then quietly left the apartment.

Jenna spent the first two hours at work studying catalogs. She was about to embark on a walk of inspection through the store to make certain all her creations were still clean and properly clothed when Brant appeared at her office door.

"Jenna, don't ever sneak off again and leave me a damn note. I reached for you and you were gone."

"Brant, I had to come to work!"

"You could have woken me to say goodbye!"

"All right, I'm sorry. Now that I know how you feel about it I won't make that mistake again."

"Yeah, okay," he said, raking his hand through his hair.

"Now that you're here you could kiss me hello," she said, coming around the desk.

"Good thought," he said, pulling her close. The tension in Brant's body slowly began to dissipate as the kiss intensified, and he smiled when he finally lifted his head.

"Have a good day," he said. "I'll meet up with you later."

Jenna frowned as Brant strode out of her office. Was he that unsure of her? Thought she had deserted him when he awoke to find the apartment empty?

"Jenna?" Barry said from the doorway, bringing her out of her reverie. "How can you take up with that guy when he just got out of Victoria Shane's bed?"

"Barry, you've no idea what you're talking about."

"Lord, you're naive. Adams is investing money in Victoria Shane's next picture. There's even talk that he might have a small part in it to see if he can act."

"That's ridiculous."

"All right," he said, throwing up his hands. "I tried. I'll see you later."

Jenna walked back to her desk and sank onto her chair. No! It wasn't true.

The day seemed endless to Jenna as she went about her appointed rounds. Barry's words haunted her, much to her disgust.

Jenna had a pounding headache when she let herself into her apartment, and she decided that two aspirin were in order.

A knock sounded at the door and Jenna pushed herself wearily to her feet to answer it.

"Pizza," Brant said, a large, flat box in his hand.

She was, aware of how very glad she was to see him. Brant set the pizza on the table while Jenna got sodas and glasses.

"Here you go," he said, handing her a gooey slice. "That boss of yours sure gave me a dirty look when I was coming down the stairs from your office today."

"Barry said he'd heard you were investing in Victoria Shane's new picture. I told him he was crazy."

"He's right. My investment manager feels it's money in the bank."

"Oh, really? Well, Barry also informed me you might have a part in the picture."

"I said no thanks."

"I just don't see why you would do something that would insinuate you're involved with Victoria Shane."

"I'm unemployed, if you'll recall. That picture will bring me a healthy financial return. But, Jenna, you're going to have to turn a deaf ear to the gossipmongers and continue to trust me. I can't be on trial every time I turn around."

"You're right and I really am sorry. This is all very new to me. It's like living in a goldfish bowl."

Brant pulled Jenna to her feet and kissed her with such intensity that all other thoughts were driven aside.

\*

IN SPITE of her concerns, the prospect of a day with Brant at the market was extremely appealing to Jenna.

Brant had kissed her deeply before they left the apartment and she had decided then that a cup of coffee and a Silver Bullet made up a marvelous way to start a bright February morning.

"We'll go to my place first," Brant had said as he maneuvered the sports car through the traffic. "I'll take a quick shower and change into clean clothes. Then we'll drive over to Hollywood to Farmers Market."

At Brant's apartment he'd disappeared into the bedroom while

Jenna'd wandered around the enormous living room, stopping in front of the jam-packed bookshelves. A half dozen shelves were filled with books on dog breeding.

Brant had strode into the room dressed in jeans and a black sweater, and stopped as Jenna had looked up at him questioningly.

"You're really into German shepherds. You could open your own bookstore."

"Yeah, well, I'd like to own one someday," he'd said, ending the conversation by striding toward the door.

Jenna frowned as she walked with him through the market. She'd been beginning to hope that he was coming to believe and trust in her, and then he'd pulled back, closed the door on some inner part of himself. Would she ever really know him? Would he give her that chance?

Jenna forced herself to push away her gloomy mood. Farmers Market was a beehive of activity. The seemingly endless row of stalls offered everything from the mundane to the exotic for sale, and the crowds exhibited buoyant moods.

Jenna's glance swept over the crowded market and was caught by an exotic display. "Oh, Brant, live canaries!" The birds filled the air with their warbling, happy sounds. "They're so pretty," Jenna said.

"Let's get one, Jenna. We'll keep it at your place."

Brant edged his way forward. He was as excited as a little boy. His dark eyes were sparkling.

Brant returned with the canary, a book and a package of birdseed.

"We're all set," he said. "This is great. What shall we name him?"

"Maybe it's a her."

"Oh. Good thought."

The mission completed, they headed back with the canary perched on Jenna's lap. Brant talked to it nonstop in the car.

Jenna smiled at Brant with a warm, tender gaze.

"She should have a name," Jenna said.

"How about 'Sunday'? That's the day we met. A very special occasion in my life. Okay?"

"Lovely."

"Welcome to the family, Sunday," Brant said quietly.

Family, Jenna thought. Ours. Brant's and hers. That's what he wanted, needed so desperately.

"Let's move on to the topic of getting married and starting a baby," Brant said suddenly. "I've told you that I love you, Jenna. I'll make you happy. You'll have everything you've ever wanted."

"Brant, don't," Jenna said softly. "We're so new, fragile. We're not ready for marriage yet. I love you, Brant. I truly love you, but that encompasses only the part of you that I've come to know. The rest of you is still hidden."

"Why do you have to make it so complicated?" Brant said, looking at her. "If we were married it would all fall into place as we lived our lives together. We'd work it out as we went along."

"It's not that simple. We need time, Brant."

"Jenna, don't you think we'd get a better picture of our life together if we were living in the same place?"

"Are you suggesting that we live together?"

"I'd prefer to get married, but I'll settle for the other right now."

"But, Brant, I... Well, I..."

"Think about it."

Live with Brant Adams? she thought wildly. Just shack up together like half the world was doing? She was in love with him. But live together?

"Brant, if we did decide to... I mean, whose apartment would we, uh, stay at?"

"My place is bigger."

"I know, but I'd hate to drive in from Bel-Air every day."

"We could stay at your place then."

"It's a big step."

"So is marriage, but I'm ready for it," Brant said. "We could consider this a compromise. Besides—" he grinned. "—Sunday needs two parents."

"Speaking of those types of people, I could never let mine know. They'd be terribly hurt."

"I understand, Jenna," Brant said quietly. "I forget sometimes that you're part of a family. We'd be very discreet about this. I think you should know that I've never lived with a woman before. I'm not taking this lightly or treating it as a casual fling. If I had my way, we'd be married as soon as possi-

ble. I want to be with you, Jenna, and this seems like the only solution for now."

"I..."

"Hey," Brant said, "give it a rest for a while. We'll talk about it again later."

THE NEXT morning Jenna pulled out the sports section to check the basketball scores.

"What?" she gasped, as the headline glared at her. It read:

The owners of the Flames are ready to talk business. Fat contract to be offered to the Silver Bullet. Brant Adams very close to signing on the dotted line.

"Have you seen the paper?" she asked Brant.

"I'm innocent. Whatever it says, I didn't do it," he said, sinking onto the sofa.

"Look at the sports page."

"Oh, that." He nodded, his eyes flicking over the story. "It's no big deal. I'm meeting with them tomorrow."

"You're what?" Jenna said, sitting down next to him. "Why?"

"It's a type of courtesy. I listen to their offer, say no thanks and everyone goes home. It's standard procedure."

"Yes, but it says here that you're close to signing."

"You should know by now not to believe half of what you read. Now have you thought about us?"

"Yes," she said, acutely aware of the rush of relief that had swept over her.

"Brant, I'll accept you as you are. I don't feel I'm ready to get married yet, but I'll live with you."

"You will?" he said, an astonished expression on his face.

"Yes." She smiled.

"Hear that, Sunday? We're going to be a family. Oh, Jenna," he said, pulling her close, "this is terrific."

"A man who likes cute little canaries and Oreo cookies can't be all bad," Jenna said, laughing.

\*

DRESSED IN Brant's football jersey, Jenna headed for the kitchen, and Brant tugged on jeans and a black sweater before following her into the small room.

Jenna smiled. "How about hamburgers?"

"Great."

"How many... There's someone at the door."

"I'll get it," Brant said. "Maybe it's one of your admirers who'll need my subtle message."

"Oh, dear," Jenna said. "I'm coming with you."

When Brant opened the door Jenna gasped in surprise.

"Kevin," she said, "come in. What are you doing here? Brant, this is my brother Kevin."

"The Silver Bullet," Kevin said, his eyes wide. "Man, I can't believe this."

"Kevin, why are you here?" Jenna asked.

"I've had it, Jenna," he said, sinking onto the sofa. "Mom and Dad treat me like a kid and I'm not hanging around for any more. I can't believe I'm sitting in the same room with the Silver Bullet," Kevin said. "Someone like you is bound to understand why I need my freedom. No one tells the Bullet what to do."

"Only the world," Brant said. "Okay, so you're finished with old Mom and Dad. Where are you going to live?"

"I thought I'd stay here with Jenna."

"You can't," Brant said. "I live with Jenna and three's a crowd. However, if you tell your folks about it, I'll break your arm. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," Kevin said, his head bobbing up and down.

"You need a job," Brant said. "You just chucked your diploma out the window. What sounds good? Busboy? Fast foods? They don't pay much, but you might be able to afford a room at the YMCA."

Jenna opened her mouth to speak and then shut it as she saw the negative motion of Brant's head that was just barely discernible. She sank back against the cushions of the sofa and looked at Kevin. Her brother's eyes were

riveted on Brant and Kevin appeared pale beneath his tan.

"I...don't know," Kevin said quietly. "Maybe Jenna can get me a job at Randell's?"

"Could be." Brant nodded. "They clean at night there. Can you handle yourself in a fight?"

"A fight?" Kevin said, his mouth dropping open.

"You'd better be ready if you're going to be on the streets of L.A. that late."

"Oh, Lord," Kevin said, leaning his head on the top of the sofa as Brant winked at a smiling Jenna. "Maybe this wasn't such a great idea."

"Kevin," Brant said, leaning forward and resting his arms on his knees, "let me tell you something. Your parents put restrictions on you because they love you. Not all of us were that lucky. I got knifed in a shower when I was twelve years old and there were no parents around to give a damn."

"Oh, man," Kevin whispered as Jenna chewed on her bottom lip.

"You're going home, Kevin," Brant said, "and you'll work your butt off in school. You'll treat your parents with the respect they deserve and you'll be grateful you have them. Are you hearing me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. If you screw up, I'm coming to San Jose to personally beat you to a pulp."

"Lord," Jenna muttered.

"But if you do this right, I'll see to it that you meet all the L.A. Flames in the locker room next

season. What we have here, Kevin, is pure and simple blackmail. What's it going to be?"

"I'm going home, Bullet."

"Thought you might." Brant grinned. "And just for the record, I'm in love with your sister. If Jenna wasn't so stubborn, I'd be your brother-in-law by now. You can tell everyone you know that you met Bullet Adams. Just don't let it slip that I'm living here."

"Nobody is going to believe I met Bullet Adams," Kevin said, shaking his head. "Not in a million years."

"We'll fix that," Brant said, walking into the bedroom and returning with a football jersey, which he tossed to Kevin. "Here, but you won't look as cute in it as Jenna does in hers."

"Hey, thanks," Kevin said.

"You don't deserve it," Jenna said. "Get on that phone and tell Mom and Dad we're putting you on the next bus to San Jose."

The Winters were very relieved to hear from their missing son, who blurted out immediately that the Silver Bullet was in Jenna's living room. It was Bullet, Kevin told his parents, who had convinced him to come home and comply with the rules of the house. Jenna then spoke with her mother, who in turn insisted on thanking Brant for his help.

"I think she likes me," Brant said later when he returned from the bus station.

Jenna rushed into his arms and kissed him. "There aren't words to

tell you how grateful I am for what you did for Kevin."

"All I did was stick a kid on a bus. Kevin would have gone home on his own as soon as he figured out he couldn't make it alone."

"Brant, you gave something of yourself to help Kevin. You're not as empty as you think you are. I know what it took for you to tell Kevin that your parents weren't there for you when you needed them. I saw the look in your eyes."

Brant took a deep breath. "I felt like I had a sword in my gut when I was talking to Kevin. I was reliving memories I hate, things that hurt like hell, but he needed to hear it so he could realize how lucky he is."

"Oh, Brant, don't you see? You let your guard down."

"Yeah." Brant scowled. "You're turning my brain into mush. I know who I am, what I'm capable of feeling, and you're telling me the exact opposite. I'm not in the mood to go through an identity crisis or some fool thing. Leave it alone, Jenna. You said you'd accept me as I am."

BRANT'S MEETING with the owners of the Flames was the next day.

At one o'clock they pounce, Jenna thought, as she drove to Randell's. One o'clock. The big guns move in to try to buy the Silver Bullet. Well, the Silver Bullet wasn't even going to show up. Brant Adams, the man, was the one who would be in attendance at

their flashy meeting. And Brant Adams was hers.

The day was long and tiring and Jenna had difficulty concentrating on what she was doing. The hours crept by until at last it was time to go home. To Brant. To hear him tell her he was free to move on with his life, his dreams, his love.

Jenna called Brant's name as she entered the apartment. Sunday burst into song but Jenna hardly heard the lilting sound. The room seemed cold and empty without Brant.

When she finally heard the sound of his key in the lock, Jenna was on her feet, pulling open the door.

"Oh, Brant, I—" Jenna began, only to stop speaking as he moved past her into the room.

Brant tossed his sport coat onto the chair.

"Did something go wrong today?"

"Nope," he said, moving toward the sofa and sinking onto it heavily. "There's the evening paper in my jacket pocket."

Jenna pulled the paper out and opened it to the sports page. The headline read, *The Silver Bullet Says No Deal. Brant Adams Not Returning To Flames.* Jenna quickly scanned the story, which stated that all attempts by the owners of the L.A. Flames to convince the Bullet to change his plans for retirement had been futile. When pressed for details regarding his future plans Brant had simply said he was going to relax for a

while before beginning a new endeavor.

"It's over," Jenna said, staring at the paper. "You really did it. Brant, I—" Jenna walked over to where he sat slouched on the sofa, his eyes closed. "Are you regretting your decision about quitting?"

"No! How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"Then what is it?"

"I...don't know," he said, raking his hand through his silver hair. "Something just closed in on me today and I was...was..."

"What, Brant?" Jenna asked softly. "What were you feeling?"

"Frightened," he said, taking a shuddering breath as a flicker of pain crossed through the dark pools of his eyes.

"Why?" Jenna said, hardly breathing.

"Jenna, I've played football for a long time. I gave it my all, lived with the physical pain, and knew exactly who I was. I realized I was trading off the world I knew for one centered on someone else, on loving someone. It scared the hell out of me, Jenna, because I realized that if I lost you, I would have nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Oh, Brant," Jenna said, hastily wiping a tear from her cheek.

"I picked up the pen, Jenna," he shouted, causing her to jump in surprise. "I picked up the damn pen! I was a second away from signing that contract. I'm telling you, Jenna, I'm falling apart!"

"Apart? No," she said, smiling tenderly, "you're unlocking the doors within yourself for me, us."

"I don't like this!" he said, beginning to pace the floor. "I'm leaving myself wide open."

"I'll never leave you, Brant. I love you so much. I'll be with you always."

"How in hell do I know that? Where are the guarantees?"

"This isn't football. There isn't a contract I can sign. It's all-based on trust, a belief in what we have together."

"And just what exactly do we have? No commitment, no marriage certificate, no matching rings that are visible evidence of the vows we've taken. We're playing house, and I think it stinks."

"I see," Jenna said.

"Jenna," Brant said, his voice choked. "Marry me." Brant was standing in the center of the room. "I have to go out to Denver on business next week for a couple of days, but we can get our marriage license before I go. What do you say?"

What business, she thought. Why all the secrecy? As his future wife, didn't she have the right to know? Jenna took a deep breath.

"Brant what *are* your career plans?"

"Oh, man, are we going to do that again?"

"I'd like to know what my future husband is going to do for a living."

"When you're my wife I'll tell you," he said, his jaw tight.

"That's not fair, Brant. Oh, don't you see what you're doing? You're convinced that once you put that ring on my finger all your doubts and fears about me will vanish. You have to be sure of me *before* we're married. I love you! That in itself should be enough."

"Now we're back to that great little word. No thanks, I'll pass. I'll settle for a marriage certificate, if it's all the same to you. Something tangible that tells me you're committed to me forever."

"A piece of paper isn't going to do that, Brant. That belief comes from within yourself."

"It isn't there, damn it!" he roared.

"Oh, God," Jenna whispered, sinking onto the sofa.

"Why are you making this so damn complicated? We're going to be married and that's that. Look, we can fly to Vegas and—"

"No! You're deceiving yourself. It isn't going to work."

"What are you saying?"

"I don't know. I just don't know."

"Fly to Vegas with me tonight, Jenna."

"No. I can't go with you under these circumstances."

"Don't do this to me, Jenna," Brant said so quietly she barely heard him.

"We need more time, Brant. You've got to be sure of me, of my love, before we're married."

She loved him, would always love him, but she couldn't marry him. Not now, not like this.

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"Jenna?"

"I'm sorry," she said, a sob catching in her throat.

Brant closed his eyes for a moment and drew a shuddering breath. Then he turned and, without speaking, left the apartment, shutting the door quietly behind him.

A ragged sob escaped Jenna's lips as she covered her face with her hands.

\*

SHE WENT over that final scene with Brant a thousand times in her mind. Jenna had fought hard to win Brant away from his past. She had loved him with every fiber of her being and it had not been enough. The ghosts of his lonely years had reared their heads and been declared the victor.

Jenna moved through her scheduled routine in a cloud of misery. She refused to think as she performed her tasks. Her dreams were haunted by the image of Brant.

Jenna found herself searching the paper each morning for any story that might give an indication as to Brant's whereabouts. He had apparently not been seen with Victoria Shane nor been thrown in jail or done anything else to draw attention. The Silver Bullet seemed to have dropped off the face of the earth.

Jenna went about her daily routine quietly and efficiently. She had lost weight and there were shadows under her blue eyes. Barry Teel

hovered around her, inquiring if she was ill and she continually assured him she was fine. On the day he had asked her if she was still seeing Bullet Adams a single tear sliding down her cheek had given him his answer. He didn't mention Brant again.

The morning before Valentine's Day Jenna sat in her office and sketched a drawing of the new window display she would construct after the lovers' holiday.

"Jenna," Barry said, poking his head in her office and snapping her out of her reverie, "one of the mannequins in the front window fell over. Get down there quick."

"Wonderful," Jenna muttered, picking up her keys.

Unlocking the door to the display, Jenna went up the three steps and stepped inside, pulling the door closed behind her. A frown was instantly on her face as she saw that the heavy drapes were drawn tightly across the windows. Only one bank of lights was on, casting a soft luminescence over the area. Suddenly she gasped as a tall figure moved out of the shadows.

"Brant!" she said, her heart racing.

"Hello, Jenna," he said quietly.  
"What are you doing here?"

"This is where I first saw you, Jenna. You turned my life upside down the minute you looked at me with your big blue eyes. Everything changed that day."

Jenna longed to rush into his arms and be enveloped in the protectiveness of his embrace. But she

stood perfectly still, staring at Brant. She was sure he could hear the wild beating of her heart as she gazed up into the ebony depths of his eyes.

"Jenna, I love you," Brant said, lifting his hand to place it on her cheek. "I've thought of you day and night since I left the apartment. Everywhere I turned I saw your face, heard your laughter."

"Oh, Brant, I..."

"Jenna, I understand now. I really do. Nothing had meaning without you by my side. Hell, I can't even eat Oreos alone. That's what you were trying to tell me. The feelings come from within and, oh, God, Jenna, I've only been half a man since I lost you. It was as though a part of me was gone. It doesn't frighten me anymore. For the first time in my life I comprehend love and the peace and joy it can bring. We can have it all, Jenna, if you'll come back to me. I'll never doubt you again. I know you love me and now I can honestly say that I love you that much in return."

"Brant—"

"No, wait. I'm not going to ask you to marry me. I hung marriage over your head like a sledgehammer. The only way I can really prove to you that I've changed is to share it all with you, Jenna Winter, not Mrs. Brant Adams. Just tell me you still love me."

"Oh, Brant, I never stopped loving you."

With a soft moan, Brant stepped forward and swept Jenna into his

arms, covering her mouth with his in a long, searing kiss. Tears flowed unchecked down Jenna's cheeks as she melted against him, relishing his strength, the very essence of the only man she had ever loved.

Brant said, close to her lips, "Let's get out of here. There's something I have to show you."

Brant led Jenna through the store and out to where his car was parked. He pulled her close, kissing her until she could hardly breathe, before settling her in the passenger's seat.

Jenna drew a steady breath. Brant was complete, whole, capable of giving, sharing of himself. The shifting sand beneath their feet had been transformed into solid granite and would support them forever as their love grew even stronger.

"Is our Sunday okay?" Brant asked.

"She's fine."

She swallowed the sob that caught in her throat as her heart nearly burst with love for him.

Brant drove through Bel-Air and then circled the Santa Monica Mountains until they reached the far side of the rugged terrain. He turned off the main road onto a narrow path. After they had gone about a mile he pressed his foot on the brake and pointed to a small wooden sign at the side of the road.

"There," he said. "There it is."

The sign read My Jenna's Kennels.

"Brant?" Jenna said, looking at him in confusion.

"My dream, Jenna. German shepherds. I'm going to breed the finest dogs in the country for use as Seeing Eye dogs and police canine patrols. I'm just getting started and it's going to be great. That's why I went to Denver. I made arrangements to buy a half dozen top-quality puppies."

"Oh, Brant, this is wonderful," Jenna said as they drove farther in. "Your eyes are just dancing with excitement. I can see how much this means to you."

"Hey, Brant," a man called as they stepped out of the car. "Come to visit your babies, huh?"

"Sure did, Larry, and to show them to my Jenna."

"So you're the little lady Brant named this place for," Larry said. "Nice to meet you, Jenna."

"Thank you," she said. "May I see the puppies?"

"You bet," Larry said. "They're up to no good at the moment, holding a wrestling match."

For the next fifteen minutes Jenna played with the furry bundles, a constant smile on her face. The puppies tumbled over their own feet, barked and ran around with boundless energy.

"Excuse me, madam," Brant finally said, "but could I have a word with you?"

"What? Oh, of course. Brant, they're adorable! They're so cute and frisky and they're obviously intelligent."

"I think she approves, boss," Larry said.

"She'd better," Brant said, laughing. "That's her name on the sign. Let's go for a walk, Jenna."

Hand in hand, they strolled up a grassy hill and out of view of the kennels to the top of the incline that was dotted with large trees. Brant stared down at the valley below for several long minutes before turning again to face Jenna.

"I own all this land," he said quietly. "Up here, on the top of this hill is where I want to build our home. The city would be there whenever we want it, but the rest of the time we'd be away from the noise and hassle. We'd create our own world of peace...and love. This is my dream, Jenna, all of it. Now it's your choice to make. Will you come with me?"

Jenna was so choked with tears she was unable to speak. She simply lifted her arms to receive Brant into her embrace. He buried his face in the fragrant mass of her silky curls and when he lifted his head to gaze down at her there were tears glistening in his dark eyes.

"I love you," he whispered. "God, how I love you. I prayed for this moment. Forgive me for the pain I've caused you. I'm so sorry, Jenna."

"The past is forgotten. The future is ours now, Brant. There's just one thing I'd like to know."

"What is it?"

"Will you marry me, Brant Adams? You see, I plan to raise a half

dozen babies on this hill and it would be a lot less complicated for the mailman if we all had the same last name."

"You'll marry me? You will? Do you mean it?"

"Yes! Well? Do I have to propose on one knee or something, Bullet?"

"No!" Brant cupped her face in his large hands as he lowered his head to find her mouth. His tongue drew a lazy line over her lips, parting them to explore the sweet darkness within. Jenna cir-

ced Brant's neck with her arms as she passionately returned the kiss.

Forgotten were the lonely nights filled with tears and loneliness. Jenna molded herself to the hard contours of Brant's rugged length.

"I love you, Jenna," Brant said, raising his head to look at her. "You've taught me how to live and love. You filled the emptiness within me and made me a total man, complete, whole."

"And I love you, Brant. Together, my love, together we are going to have it all."





# **SONDRA STANFORD**

## **Cupid's Task**



Josh Steele didn't question why he'd brought a resentful daughter to her father's hospital bedside in Texas. And he was quite sure Kitty Peterson wouldn't stay. But he wasn't sure at all of why that bothered him so much...

  
Joshua Steele crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe, amused by and appreciative of the scene before him. It was one to warm a man's heart on a frigid January night in Chicago at the end of a long, tedious journey.

"And three...and four...and...point those toes and six and..." A woman's lilting voice chanted above the lively beat of a popular piece of music.

There were perhaps thirty people in the exercise class. Josh's grin widened as he watched their movements, some awkward, others graceful.

In the latter category was the woman he'd come to see. Rich black hair was braided and pinned into a mound atop her head. Daintily curved shoulders and a narrow rib cage led down to the tiniest of waists before the body flared once more into exquisitely rounded hips.

There was a twitter of giggles. Josh was suddenly being scrutinized by thirty pairs of eyes.

Kitty Peterson twisted her head around and saw the man. She quickly rose to her feet and strode toward him. His face was angular, with strong lines slashing on either side of his mouth. A web of tiny, fine lines radiated outward from his gray eyes.

A frown lowered her dark eyebrows. "Look, unless you have a legitimate reason for being here, I think you'd better leave."

She began to turn from him, but Josh lightly touched her arm. "I take it you're Katherine Peterson?"

Kitty nodded, tilting her head. "It seems you have the advantage."

"My name is Joshua Steele. I'm a neighbor as well as an employee of your father's," Josh explained. "I'm here to ask you to come to Texas and be a guest at his ranch for a few months."

Kitty stared at him, scarcely believing her ears. "You interrupted my class for that?" she demanded incredulously. "Mark Winters must have more money to burn than I thought if he sent you all the way to Chicago just to issue an invitation I've already refused! You wasted yourself a trip, Mr. Steele. I have no intention of ever going to visit my *father*." The emphasis on the last word was unmistakably sarcastic. Kitty's dark eyes glittered with fire. "As far as I'm concerned, Mark Winters doesn't even exist, except on a movie screen! And now that we've exhausted that subject, I have to get back to my class. It's been nice meeting you, Mr. Steele."

"Not so fast," he grated. "And the name's Josh." As she took a step past him, Josh's hand shot out and firmly clasped around her arm. "For the life of me, I can't figure why Mark wants to be reunited with an uncaring daughter like you. But he does, and I'm going to see that he gets his wish."

Kitty raised one black eyebrow. "Oh, really?"

Josh abruptly dropped her arm and, sighing raggedly, rubbed his neck. "The truth is, Mark is in serious condition in a Dallas hospital. If you care for him at all, I think you ought to go see him. His horse spooked and threw him off. Then one of the horse's hooves came down on him. He has a broken leg and a punctured lung."

Kitty was silent for a moment. Josh could almost see the wheels turning inside her head. A strangely sad look had come across her face, utterly at odds with the anger she'd displayed a few minutes ago. He thought she was softening, so when she spoke again, he was stunned when she refused.

"There's no point in it," she said at last. "I'm sorry he's been injured, I really am, but it doesn't change anything. Except for the biological fact that links us together, Mark Winters is nothing to me, nor am I to him."

"You can't be serious!" Josh exclaimed.

"I'm very serious," Kitty replied. Her calmness lent the words a quiet emphasis.

"Poor Mark," Josh murmured. "What a raw deal life handed him when it gave him you for a daughter."

Her dormant anger flared to life again. Kitty's eyes narrowed. "I'm the one who got the raw deal!" she declared. "Mark Winters doesn't know the meaning of the word *father*, so why should I pretend to be a loving daughter?"

Josh stared at her for another long moment. Kitty had the uncomfortable sensation that he felt he was looking at some strange species of life that was new to the world... new and distasteful.

Then he shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said indifferently. He reached inside his jacket, pulled out an airline folder and handed it to Kitty. "I took the liberty of buying you a plane ticket to Dallas. It leaves late this afternoon."

"You shouldn't have done that."

He looked at her for a long time as though he were reading the record of her soul and found it black.

"It's immaterial to me whether you use that ticket or not," he said finally. "Frankly, I think Mark would be better off dying without seeing a daughter who's so eaten up with hate."

Tears burned Kitty's eyes. But she wasn't sure whom the tears were for—the dangerously ill man who was struggling for his life, or the little girl who had once so desperately craved attention from her famous father.

JOSH GAZED at the empty window seat beside him. His sense of failure was acute. His friendship with Mark Winters ran deep, and Josh had been determined to give the injured man the one thing he desired most—a reunion with his daughter. Now he couldn't deliver and he was bitterly disappointed.

"Excuse me," said a breathless female voice, "but I believe that's my seat."

Josh jerked his head around to stare unbelievingly at Kitty Peterson. His heart knocked against his rib cage.

He leaped to his feet. "I'm happy you changed your mind," he said softly.

Kitty shrugged. "I hated to waste the ticket."

Josh helped her to her seat next to the window.

"We'll be taking off momentarily," a stewardess said over the loudspeaker.

Josh settled down beside Kitty. "You almost didn't make it," he observed wryly.

"I know." Kitty sucked in a deep breath. "I was running through the airport like a sprinter in the Olympics."

Josh chuckled and the strain of tension between them eased.

The jet gathered momentum and, with engines screaming, lifted off the ground.

"Have you ever been to Texas?"

Kitty shook her head. ~~I'VE GOT TO~~ I've done very little traveling at all?

"I figured a movie star's daughter would have traveled all over the world."

Kitty's smile was wry. "My life has been very un-Hollywood."

They spoke little more before their cocktails arrived. Kitty was busy beating down her anxieties. Mark Winters might not qualify as her ideal candidate for a Father of the Year award, but Kitty didn't want him to die.

She sipped at her Bloody Mary, searching for the courage to ask the question most on her mind. Finally she turned to Josh and asked, "What is Mark like?"

Josh looked at her over the rim of his glass of scotch and soda. "Don't you know?"

Kitty shook her head, and Josh saw that she was dead serious. He tried to reply honestly. "Mark is probably the finest man I've ever known." When frank skepticism glowed from Kitty's eyes, Josh added gruffly, "You asked me. I'm telling you."

Kitty lowered her gaze. "All right," she said.

"I met him right after I'd graduated from high school. He bought my father's ranch, and hired me on as his foreman. He even subsidized part of my college expenses."

"How...how nice for you." Kitty almost choked over the words as unexpected and brutal pain splashed over her.

~~REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED~~ Josh looked at her sharply. He had an overwhelming desire to

comfort her, though he had no idea why.

Kitty said stiffly, "Do you still live on the ranch with him?"

Josh shook his head. "No. Now I have my own place a few miles away."

"Don't you resent it?" Kitty's dark eyes were wide with curiosity. "That Mark owns the land that should have been yours?"

Josh said slowly, "The ranch was badly run down. The bank would have eventually foreclosed. Mark gave me the chance to stay there for a few more years, and when he decided to move in permanently, he lent me money to help purchase my own ranch."

"I see." Kitty was thoughtful. "And you're still his foreman?"

"No. When Mark moved to the ranch for good, he wanted to retire completely from all his other business ventures as well as from making films. I'm his business manager. I handle all his investment affairs. It means traveling fairly often, but whenever I do, Mark's ranch hands take care of things at my place. You asked what Mark is like," Josh went on huskily. "He's been like a father to me."

Kitty polished off the remainder of her Bloody Mary. "How nice for you." Bitterness had crept into her voice.

Josh could have bitten off his tongue. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have said that."

Kitty shrugged. "Don't worry. My father's lack of interest in me

dates back far before you came on the scene."

"How long has it been since you've seen Mark?" Josh asked curiously.

"Since his divorce from my mother. I was two years old at the time."

"You've never seen him in all these years?" Josh asked, stunned.

Kitty unflinchingly met his eyes. "Mark was always too tied up with his next movie or the next woman in his life or his next overseas holiday. I was never on his list of priorities. That's why I can't pretend now that I care about him."

"But you're here. You're going to see him."

"Because I had a temporary mental aberration, obviously," Kitty retorted angrily. "I'll make my one obligatory visit to him and head back home as fast as I can."

"Hard as nails, aren't you?" Josh observed, angry himself now. "Mark told me you'd been married once but that it had failed. I can sure see why. You don't even have a heart."

Hot blood surged to Kitty's cheeks. How dare this man presume to judge her! She turned to stare out the window into the black depths of the night. They were compelled to remain sitting together in a tight space for the rest of the flight. Quarreling would only make it worse.

\*

MARK WINTERS'S eyes were closed, and his head rested wearily against the pillows. His thick dark hair was thinning now and almost completely silver; the ruggedly etched planes of his face had become sharp and gaunt. His right leg was elevated and in a cast; gray oxygen tubes were inserted into his nostrils, and an I.V. was connected to a vein in his left arm.

Kitty was deeply shocked at how still he was and how very ill he looked. Josh had told her so, but the reality of seeing him this way was terrifying.

She turned jerkily away, but her attention was drawn back to the bed by that familiar, distinctive voice.

"So you did come."

Kitty turned back. Only his incredibly beautiful lake blue eyes had not changed with the years. They were still as keen and penetrating as they'd ever been in Technicolor.

She stepped forward. "I almost didn't come."

Mark Winters managed a wan smile. "At least you're honest."

For a long time father and daughter were silent, each frankly assessing and studying the face of a familiar stranger. There were only questions in their eyes and a wariness on both sides.

Kitty pulled a chair near the bed. When she was seated and looked toward Mark again, she saw that a faint ghost of a smile played across

his dry lips. "You've grown into a very beautiful woman, Kitten," he said.

Kitty felt a lump swell in her throat. No one else had ever called her that. When she was young, it had seemed to her a very special name, an endearment that bonded her close to Mark through his letters and phone calls and helped her in her illusion that her father did love her, that soon he would visit her. Now, surprisingly, hearing him say it melted something inside her.

"Thanks," she said brusquely, trying to hide the emotion that had so unexpectedly come over her. "People tell me I take after Mother."

Mark's head made a small movement that simulated a nod. "How is Jeanne?"

"Fine. She stays very active in volunteer organizations and she's very happy in her new marriage."

If there was a certain accusation in her last statement, Mark ignored it. Mildly, he said, "I'm glad for her. She's a wonderful woman." An odd light flickered in his eyes. He turned his head and looked away.

He shifted his position just a fraction and grimaced. "Damn it, they've got me so hog-tied in this bed I can hardly move an inch. Don't ever let a horse fall on you, Kitten. It's the pits."

In spite of herself, Kitty grinned in sympathy. "I don't suppose I'm in much danger of that in Chicago."

"You're going to spend some time at my ranch, aren't you?" Mark asked.

"I don't imagine there'll be time. I can only be away from my job a week or two at the most."

"A week or two isn't much. And that's assuming," he added glumly, "I fool the doctors and ever get out of this place alive and go home myself."

"I won't listen to talk like that," Kitty said sharply. "Of course you'll be going home. You're going to be fine. It just may take a little while."

Mark went still. "You *do* care, after all," he said shakily.

Kitty bristled. "Well, of course. The same way I'd be concerned for an injured stray dog."

Mark broke the heaviness of the moment by laughing abruptly. They both knew the truth, but the underlying sentiments were best left unspoken.

Suddenly he coughed, his expression turning to pain, and Kitty was instantly alarmed.

Mark shook his head. "I shouldn't have laughed."

Kitty was not at all reassured and was silently debating whether to ring for a nurse when the door opened behind her. She swung around eagerly, hoping it was a nurse, but instead it was Josh.

"The nurses told me we need to leave now," he said quietly. "Before Mark gets too tired."

Kitty turned back to Mark and he clasped her hand. It was the first physical contact between

them. "Think about staying," he said urgently. "You ought to learn something about the ranch anyway. One day it'll be yours."

Mark looked so tired that Kitty hated to argue with him, but she couldn't let him dwell in his fantasy. "I don't want anything from you, Mark. Anyway, that day's a long way off."

Mark released her hand. "We'll discuss it later," he said wearily. "Now I want to rest."

Kitty nodded and, not trusting herself to speak, left the room.

Josh did not immediately follow Kitty out of the room because Mark asked him to stay a minute.

HER EYES stung with salty tears, and she fought to hold them back when Josh caught up with her. But once they were inside the cab of Josh's truck, Kitty slumped forward, elbows on her knees, and buried her face in her hands in a gesture of absolute despair.

Josh muttered a curse and pried her hands away from her face, pulling her into his arms.

At first Kitty was stiff, resisting him. Josh could feel the rigidness in her bearing, the tension emanating from within her, and then he felt the released tension of her shoulders. His hands went up to stroke them, to caress the back of her neck. Kitty's hands slid around his waist and she clung to him. He held her until he could feel the warmth of her even through her clothing, until he could infuse her with his own warmth.

Josh pressed his cheek to hers. He felt Kitty tremble against him, and he wanted her.

"Why," he demanded gruffly, angrily, "did you have to come along and disturb my life?"

Swiftly, Kitty pushed him away. "You barged into *my* life, not the other way around, remember?" she told him. Her voice was cold and distant, shutting him out with willful determination.

THE MEDICAL NEWS was encouraging. It would still be a while before Mark could be released from the hospital, but it was clear that the doctors no longer felt his life was in danger.

Kitty had spent most of her time with him the past two days. They were slowly getting acquainted with each other, and if Kitty were strictly honest with herself, she'd be forced to admit she'd enjoyed his company as much as he seemed to enjoy hers.

They'd been doing fine until this morning, when Mark had badgered her into going to his ranch near Brownwood. For some reason Kitty couldn't understand, it seemed to matter a lot to Mark that she spend some time there. For her part, she might not have been so vehemently opposed to it if the deal hadn't included Josh.

After that day in the truck, Josh had gone to Houston on business. But now he was back—at Mark's insistence—to take her to the ranch.

She shouldn't be glad to see him, but she was. For some reason Josh affected her in a way that other men did not.

The long drive from Dallas to the ranch was accomplished later that afternoon. They passed the time by keeping up a steady stream of conversation.

"It seems to me," Kitty said thoughtfully, looking out the window at the rocky, rolling hills, "that this must be a terribly lonely place to grow up."

Josh shrugged. "When you're born to it, you don't know anything different. I suppose the only time in my life I actually felt lonely was right after my mother died. I was fourteen."

"That must have been tough," Kitty said softly. "And your father?"

She saw a slight tension come to his jaw. "He died when I was twenty-two," he replied after a small hesitation, "but he'd been gone from the ranch since I was seventeen, so I was used to being on my own by then." Josh kept his eyes on the downhill slope of the highway. "Mark took me under his wing, taught me a lot, gave me advice." He smiled whimsically. "And he chewed me out whenever he thought I needed that, too."

Kitty smiled. "That's sort of how my stepfather's been to me," she said. "But the main reason I'm fond of him is because he's so good to my mother. She knows that he loves her, that no matter what,

he'll come home to her every night."

Josh shot her a quick, inquiring look. "Unlike Mark?"

"Are you kidding?" Kitty retorted. "He openly cheated on my mother... on his second wife, too, I understand. It was common knowledge."

Josh shook his head. "I guess I was always too busy with my own life to pay any attention to things like Hollywood gossip. He's always been steady and dependable. Why, when he finally decided to make the ranch his permanent home, his last wife was the one to walk out on him, not the other way around."

Kitty could tell by the tone of his voice that Josh hadn't thought much of Mark's last wife.

She was curious about a woman whom Mark had mentioned in the hospital. She said, "Tell me about Ellie."

"Ellie? She's one of the finest ladies west of the Mississippi," he answered with unmistakable sincerity. "She's been widowed about ten years, and though she still lives on her ranch, her son Adam runs it now. Adam's my best friend. After my mother died, I guess you could say Ellie became my second mother."

The truck crested a hill, and they turned off the highway onto a blacktopped rural road just as the last remnants of daylight vanished.

When Josh drove through a private gate, the headlights picked out

a sprawling, modern brick house. He parked the vehicle and unloaded Kitty's bags.

Josh produced a key to the house. Inside, Kitty had a hurried glimpse of a spacious living room with a stone fireplace at one end before she followed Josh to a guest bedroom, where he deposited her luggage.

When Josh turned, he saw the forlorn expression on her face as she stood in the doorway. She looked sad, confused, out of her element.

Josh's eyes went to the pink lips that looked so vulnerable and so infinitely desirable.

"Are you afraid?" he asked after a moment. "To stay here alone?"

Kitty shook her head. "No. I feel like an intruder."

She fought a sudden urge to reach out to Josh. She didn't want him to leave, and what she saw in his eyes made her quiver with unexpected yearning.

"You could," Josh said gruffly, "come home with me."

He hadn't meant to say it, but the words just came.

Her lips trembled. But she shook her head.

"It... wouldn't be wise," she said softly.

She was right, of course. He nodded, trying to mask his true feelings. He despised himself for wanting her. Hadn't one wrong woman in his life been enough?

\*

THE SUN was beginning to lower in the western sky late the next afternoon when Josh reached the Winters house. His hand was on the handle of the cab when he heard another vehicle.

A minute later it came to a halt behind Josh's truck. Kitty hopped out of the passenger side while Oakie, one of Mark's hired hands, got out a bit more slowly.

"Kitty's been helping Red and me put out feed in the pasture." Oakie smiled shyly at Kitty before adding, "We might make a rancher out of her in time."

"Is that so?" Josh murmured. Somehow he just couldn't envision such a delicately feminine creature as Kitty traipsing around a winter pasture, tossing hay to a herd of hungry cattle. "A woman who's used to bright lights isn't about to settle for a simple, quiet life out here. She'd go stir crazy in no time."

Oakie got back inside his truck and gunned the motor. "You mark my words," he said mildly. "This little gal's got more grit than you might expect." He tipped the brim of his hat and backed the truck away.

While Kitty waved, an inner demon continued to bedevil Josh. "Well," he drawled, "it seems you made a conquest there."

Kitty lowered her hand, and the smile she'd worn slowly faded. "Oakie and Red were very kind to me this afternoon, and I see no

reason why I shouldn't be friendly to them. Anyway, I fail to see what business it is of yours." She flung open the door to the house and went inside.

Josh entered close behind her. "You're right," he grated. "It's not a damn bit of my business." His hand went to her shoulder, and there was contrition in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said stiffly, then paused. "I guess," he went on with the ghost of a smile, "I was convicting you of a crime someone else committed."

It was a telling comment, but Kitty didn't dare ask for a more elaborate explanation. It was enough to know that sometime, someplace, Josh, like her, had been badly hurt.

He released her shoulder and drew something from his pocket and held it toward her. "I came to give you this," he said.

Kitty's eyes widened, but she made no move to take the checkbook from him. "I don't understand," she said quietly.

"Mark gave me instructions to open a checking account for you. I did."

"Well, you can just close it again." She was blazing furious. "It's just like Mark to think he can buy my affections now just like he used to buy off his guilt!"

Josh thrust the checkbook into her hands. "Mark's a lousy father, all right, wanting to see that his daughter is taken care of financially! Poor little Kitty...so very mistreated!" A sneer twisted

his lips. "It seems to me that if you hate him so much, you could have better revenge by running through his money, not rejecting it."

Wildly, she threw the checkbook at him. It hit the side of his jaw before falling to the floor.

Josh's eyes glinted dangerously. Without warning, he seized her, imprisoning her in his arms. His lips were ruthless as he kissed her, and his embrace, when she tried to free herself, was punishing.

Worse yet was the fire that ignited inside her, the ache of desire that spread through her limbs.

When he pushed her from him at last, Kitty was as outraged with herself and her treacherous reactions as she was with him.

She lifted an unsteady hand to her swollen lips and ordered with as much force as she could summon, "Get out! Get out of here this minute! And keep away from me, do you hear?"

Josh's face, dark with his own violent emotions, went white; then a deep, angry red surged into it again.

He presented a mock bow. "It's entirely my pleasure!"

TWO DAYS LATER she made the long drive to Dallas. When she arrived at Mark's hospital room, he was positively beaming.

"Did you bring some champagne?" He paused dramatically before announcing, "I can go home this weekend."

"Fantastic!" Kitty sat down on the edge of the bed and clasped his

hands. "The champagne will be chilled and ready when you get there."

"Fair enough." Mark grinned.

He did appear much improved, Kitty decided. His skin had taken on a touch of color and his eyes were deep blue, bright and alert.

"Now," she said sternly, "we'd better discuss that checking account you had set up for me. I can't accept it."

Mark sighed. "Look, Kitten, you'll need money while you're here and—"

Kitty cut him off. "I won't be here that long if you're coming home this weekend." She went on more stridently. "I don't want your money. You thought you could use it to bribe me into staying. You're just like Josh. You think I'm heartless and mercenary...that I'd try to take advantage of you."

"That's not true," Mark denied in a voice filled with agony. "My God, Kitten, you've rejected every gift I've sent since you were eighteen years old. Why would I believe you've softened now? I just didn't want financial concerns to be the deciding factor about whether or not you stayed. This trip has cost you money. I don't want the expenses coming out of your pocket—especially when I can so easily afford it. As a favor to me," he pleaded, "accept the money."

Kitty shook her head. "You've got a romanticized fantasy that a few months together can make up

for twenty-four years, but that's impossible."

"I get the point." He looked wistful. "But can't we at least be friends?"

She remained stonily silent for a moment longer, but finally she nodded. "We can try," she whispered.

A slow smile relaxed Mark's face. "Okay, friend," he said, "tell me what's going on with you and Josh."

Kitty began pacing the room. "We rub each other the wrong way. He's too opinionated and judgmental."

To her amazement, Mark looked highly amused. "I suppose Josh would find you a bit difficult to understand. The sort of woman he'd get along with is one who doesn't consider the entire male sex her natural enemy."

"And whose fault is that?" Kitty demanded bitterly.

"I may be partially to blame," Mark said thoughtfully, "but your ex-husband must surely bear his share of it, too."

Kitty couldn't meet his eyes. She went to stare out the window at the somber, gray day. "That's right," she said in a choking voice. "Bob was exactly like you. It didn't seem to occur to him to be faithful to his wife."

"All right," Mark said gruffly. "I deserved that crack. But listen, Kitten, you've become too hard, too filled with hate. Did your mother turn into such a bitter woman?"

Kitty cringed at the unflattering description. Was she, she wondered bleakly, really like that? She turned toward him, surprised at both his question and her answer. "No," she said softly, "she never has seemed bitter, toward you or men in general. I guess she has a more forgiving nature than I do."

IT WASN'T pleasant to be confronted by her defects, but once raised, the subject nagged at Kitty like an unrelenting headache. That night as she undressed for bed, she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Her long black hair billowed around her slender bare shoulders, and her eyes were dark and thoughtful. Was she really, she asked herself again, an implacable, forbidding man-hater? The idea was appalling.

But then she thought of Josh's kiss, of the fast-spreading heat aroused by his lips, and the question was answered.

After Bob, she'd convinced herself that she could easily live without a man, without sex, without companionship and affection, without love. Meeting Josh had changed all that.

\*

FOLLOWING Red's directions, Kitty drove to Josh's ranch. Josh's truck was in the drive. Kitty parked behind it.

Josh stepped out of his workshop and saw Kitty walking toward the back of the truck. Her

movements were purposeful and confident. For a timeless moment his heart stopped. He went toward her.

"Hi. This is a nice surprise."

Kitty had lowered the tailgate. She lifted her head at his greeting and the warmth in her smile could have melted an icecap.

"Hi, yourself," Kitty said. "Red picked up your barbed wire in town and asked me to bring it over."

A strange tension gripped them. They looked at each other for a long moment.

"I like your place." She broke the contact of their eyes and glanced around.

"It's okay." Josh shrugged. "Nothing fancy like your father's place, but it suits me. The house is about two years old. I lived in a trailer while I was building it."

He carried the bundles of wire into the garage. When he came back, he shut the tailgate of the truck. "Would you," he asked hesitantly, "like a tour?"

"I thought you'd never ask." Kitty laughed.

They entered the house through the kitchen, and Kitty was immediately entranced. Lovely walnut cabinets contrasted with warm terra-cotta countertops, and the soft color was picked up again by the narrow blinds at the windows.

The warm earth tones of the kitchen carried through to the living room, with its walnut paneling and a beautiful stone fireplace dominating the end wall.

"You have a beautiful home, Josh," Kitty said. "I'm impressed."

Josh shrugged. "Mark's bedroom is larger than my living room. You can't be that impressed."

"You wouldn't be so quick to put it down," she said, "if you could see my apartment. This house must be three times its size."

There'd been a frozen look to his face, but suddenly it thawed. "I keep forgetting that you don't live like a rich man's daughter," he said softly.

Kitty sighed. "Believe me, I don't forget it for a minute."

Kitty's gaze went to the droop of Josh's hair across his brow. She wanted to touch his broad shoulders, to be held close to his wide, firm chest. The desire shook her and she forced herself to look away. "I'd better go," she said unsteadily.

"Stay. Have dinner with me."

"I'd like that," she found herself replying.

Together they prepared a simple meal. They laughed a lot and talked about anything that came into their heads.

Over dinner, Josh asked her about her marriage. "It was an utter flop," Kitty said frankly. "Bob truly thought I ought to be content enough being his wife to close my eyes to his infidelities. Which, of course, I couldn't do."

"So the marriage ended."

"With relief on Bob's part and disillusionment on mine." She

shrugged. "What about you? Did you ever come close to marriage?"

"Once." Josh refilled their wineglasses and took a sip. "A girl in Houston. I thought Dana was everything I'd ever want in a wife. She'd visited the ranch a couple of times when the house was under construction, and I thought she understood that this would be our home." He grimaced, remembering. "It turned out she just considered it a weekend sort of place. She wanted me to work for her father in his investment firm so that we could be in Houston and live the glamorous sort of life she was used to. I refused. She threw the engagement ring in my face at a party, in front of about fifty people, then left with another man and spent the night with him."

Kitty gasped. Even Bob had never been that cruel, that blatantly obvious with his infidelities.

Josh saw the compassion in her eyes and said lightly, "Oh, I've come to realize this sort of life isn't for most women. Even my mother was never happy. I think the only woman I've ever known who was genuinely happy with this life is Mark's Ellie."

"Is it possible," Kitty suggested gently, "that it was her relationship with your father that made your mother unhappy, rather than ranch life itself?"

Josh nodded. "That was a lot of it, all right. My father drank too much and they used to quarrel all

the time. But that's enough about me," he said with a smile. "You're an enigma to me, Kitty."

"In what way?"

They had finished their meal and were carrying their plates back into the kitchen. "I figured the boredom would drive you away within a couple of days. I had you figured wrong."

While he poured coffee, Kitty admitted, "I didn't expect to, but I like the ranch."

"Does that mean you'll be staying after all?"

Kitty shook her head. "I can't. I have to get back to my job. Anyways, there's no point in Mark and my pretending our relationship will ever be more than superficial. He'd soon feel I was cramping his style."

"You're determined to keep painting as black a picture of him as you possibly can, aren't you?" Josh demanded. "Why can't you forgive him?"

"I may forgive, but I don't know how I can forget." She gazed into her cup. "When I was seven, I was injured in a car accident and in the hospital." Her voice shook as old emotions welled up inside her. "Every day I prayed he'd walk through the door, but it never happened. He called and deluged my room with flowers and presents, but he never came."

"Kitty!" Josh's voice was filled with unmistakable compassion.

She held up a hand. "The same thing happened when I was twelve and had the lead in a school play, and again the night of my high

school graduation. When he didn't bother to show up for that, I finally saw Mark as he really was—a selfish man who just didn't give a damn about me."

Josh reached for her hand, but Kitty snatched it away.

"You've accused me of being a lousy daughter, and you're absolutely right! From the night of my graduation, I was finished with Mark Winters. After that I refused to talk to him on the phone or accept his letters or gifts, and when I got married I didn't bother to invite him to my wedding. Can you imagine how ridiculous I would have looked," she challenged, "if I'd counted on him to accompany me down the aisle? Yet you wonder why I didn't want to come see him!"

"Kitty, Kitty, I hate seeing you so bitter," Josh said gently. "I didn't have such a great father either, but I didn't let it destroy my love for him."

"Well, mine wasn't around to love!" Kitty said with stinging vehemence. "He was only a face on a movie screen to me."

"Give him a break," Josh pleaded. "Mark isn't the same man. And he loves you, Kitty." Suddenly he stood. "I've got something to show you," he said, crossing the room to the bookcase. He opened a door, took out something and returned to sit beside her.

In his hand he held a small blue velvet jeweler's box, and when he snapped it open, Kitty saw an ex-

quisite pair of diamond earrings. "He plans to give these to you the day he gets home from the hospital."

"What does that prove?" Kitty snapped. "He's only doing what he's always done—trying to buy my affection."

Josh snapped the lid shut on the box and dropped it into his pocket. "Obviously there's no way Mark can ever make things up to you. You even let the hurts from your childhood spill over into the rest of your life. You had a dud of a husband, and because he cheated on you the way Mark did on your mother, you've branded all men as the same. Now no other man is allowed to get near you." His mouth twisted.

Kitty shook with rage. "You don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about!"

"Don't I?" Without warning, Josh snatched her into his arms. "I've wanted you since the first moment we met. And you want me, too."

"No!" Kitty pressed her hand against the unyielding wall of his chest. The warmth of his body so near to hers was seeping into her skin, into her consciousness, undermining her long-held resolve.

"Look at me," Josh ordered. "Look at me and tell me you don't want me too."

Kitty closed her eyes, fighting the weakness that was spreading through her. She dared not look at him because if she did, she knew she'd be lost.

Josh's lips went to her throat. The feel of his touch on her flesh was shattering.

"Ah, Josh," she murmured. "Please don't do this. Don't make me want you."

His lips traveled up her chin to the corner of her mouth. "I told you," he whispered against her lips, "you already do. Is it so terrible?"

"Yes, yes, terrible," she answered in defeat.

TWILIGHT CAST deepening shadows across the bedroom and the figures of the two lovers seemed as one.

Kitty accepted his kisses hungrily, responding with no thought beyond the wonder of the moment. For so very long she had held herself under stern control, aloof from the physical demands of her body. Now she could no more have stopped the flood of sensations that charged her than she could have halted a hurricane.

Josh's lovemaking was unhurried and thorough. Her body was sensitive to the lightest touch of his fingertips, the most fleeting pressure of his firm lips. She was sharply aware of his breath against her skin.

Her own wild needs matched the primitive ruthlessness of his, and as he pushed her to the pillows and came down to her at last, she was more than ready.

They fitted together with overwhelming urgency. Kitty thought she would die from the pain of un-

released passion that clouded her mind.

Then she ceased to think at all. The delectable, sweet agony was too great. Every atom of her body was focused only on the shattering ecstasy that came at last. She cried out again and again and shuddered against Josh's damp chest as the vortex swirled seemingly without end.

Josh continued to hold her long afterward, reluctant even in exhaustion to let her go. It had been extraordinary.

He lifted a hand and brushed it across her moist brow. "You are," he said finally, "very, very special, Kitty." It wasn't what he'd wanted to say, but the words that were inscribed on his heart stayed hidden in the darkness.

Kitty fought tears that burned her throat. "Special" seemed woefully inadequate for what had just happened to her. He had been the sun and the moon and all the stars for her. She felt like a total fool.

Josh gently placed his hands on her shoulders, stopping her from getting up. "I've hurt you somehow," he said softly. "And I didn't mean to. Kitty, I'm not so good with words, but what just happened was wonderful, far beyond my dreams."

Kitty bowed her head and her voice was thick. "I can't... I... can't talk about it."

"Why not?"

Kitty shook her head as Josh turned her to face him. "It was...too good."

"How can it be too good?" For the first time, he sounded amused.

Kitty opened her eyes and glared at him. "Because nothing can come of it. I'll be leaving soon and that will be the end of it."

Josh shook his head. "You can't leave now! I've got just as many reservations about us as you do, but something important is happening. Spend a few months here, get to know your father...and me."

She pulled away from him and moved across the room, gathering her discarded clothes.

"Why are you doing this?" Josh said hotly. "Don't you think we'll both be hurt if you go?"

"Maybe," Kitty said in a choked voice. "But not as much as if I stayed. You're interested in me now, but I don't intend to stick around until your interest wanes. I just...I just can't handle that scene again."

Josh's voice was filled with barely controlled fury. "Then you're probably right," he said cruelly. "The sooner you're gone from here, the better off we'll both be!"

MARK'S HOMECOMING was a success. His closest friends were there as well as Oakie and Red and, of course, Ellie.

And Josh.

Though it made her feel cowardly, Kitty had done her best to

stay out of his vicinity all evening until Mark suddenly commanded her attention.

"See that everyone has a glass of champagne, would you, Kitty? I have an important announcement to make."

Kitty moved around the room, refilling glasses. When she came to Josh, her hand shook as she poured the bubbly liquid into his glass. She quickly passed on to the next person without meeting his eyes.

As everyone fell expectantly silent, Mark held out his hand to Ellie. She moved to his side, and they shared a secret smile.

Mark cleared his throat and in his best stage voice thundered, "Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce you to my future wife."

There was an immediate clamor of laughter, applause and congratulations. Kitty blew a kiss to Ellie. Her approval was wholehearted because she sincerely liked Ellie. She hoped they would have a good marriage, and she drank a toast along with the rest of the guests.

Mark called for silence again and chuckled good-naturedly. "Kitty, come here."

She knew immediately that Mark was about to present her with the earrings Josh had shown her. As she moved to his side, she fretted over how to refuse gracefully.

"These are for you, Kitten," Mark began. "Not everyone here is aware of what a damn fool I was for most of your life, afraid to be

a father, mostly afraid of failing at being a father. So I just...avoided the job altogether. I had no right to expect you even to give me the time of day, yet you came to me when I was ill. I know it wasn't easy for you, but I'm grateful. I just hope someday you can forgive me for the past. So...this is for you, a small token of my love. And I do love you, Kitten. Very much."

Kitty hadn't expected the speech and the impact of it hit her hard. She blinked rapidly to hold back the tears that burned her eyes. Half laughing, half crying, she snapped roughly, "Oh, damn it, I love you too, Daddy. I always have."

Mark opened his arms, and for the first time in twenty-four years, father and daughter embraced.

Ellie hugged her next and whispered, "You just made one man very, very happy, Kitty."

Kitty laughed huskily. "I imagine you've made him even happier. I'm glad you're going to be his wife, Ellie. When's the wedding?"

"On Valentine's Day," Ellie replied. "Kitty, Mark and I would both like you to stay on and live with us. But failing that, will you at least consider staying until the wedding? It would mean so much to both of us."

She sighed and promised, "I'll think about it."

Overwhelmed by the emotions of the last half hour, Kitty felt a need to be alone. When she thought herself unobserved, she slipped through the kitchen and

out the back door. She walked across the lawn to a chair swing.

The night air crept around her, pressing cold, clammy fingers on her arms and legs and throat, and a sudden movement in the darkness startled her. From the deep shadows of the black trees, a tall, familiar form stepped forward.

Josh dropped down beside her and the swing surged forward, then back. "Well," he said, breaking the tense silence, "are you going to stay for the wedding?"

She shook her head. "Probably not. I'd like to, but I'll lose my job if I do."

"And we know," Josh sneered, "that's more important than Mark."

"What's it to you?" Kitty demanded angrily. "I thought you were anxious for me to leave."

Josh shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me one way or the other."

Kitty sensed the hurt beneath his words. She licked her lips and said, "I'm...I'm really sorry about everything. Between us, I mean. But I still think it's for the best."

"I've already realized that," he said curtly. "All I am is a struggling rancher trying to make ends meet. I don't have the financial means to satisfy a woman like you," he said with brutal coldness. "I can't possibly give you beautiful things like those diamonds Mark gave you tonight. The same diamonds you scorned."

Kitty slapped him hard. Her throat throbbed with pain and fury.

Josh thrust her from him, and his eyes were hard, cold flints. "You know, you're every bit as good at acting as your father. You certainly convinced him with your adoring-daughter act. And the other night—for a little while—you had me convinced you really cared about me."

OVER A fresh pot of coffee the next morning, the upcoming wedding was under discussion. Ellie had joined Mark and Kitty for breakfast and Kitty was openly amused at the engaged pair's wrangling over where the event was to take place. Ellie opted for a simple ceremony. Mark, on the other hand, wanted it to be as elegant as possible, with a formal dinner-dance reception at a private club. They demanded that Kitty be judge and jury, a task she wisely refused.

"Have you thought over whether or not you'll stay for it?" Mark asked. "And Ellie and I were serious about wanting you to stay for good."

Kitty stared at him. "It's out of the question," Kitty said quietly, and because she honestly hated hurting him, she added quickly, before she could change her mind, "We'll compromise. I'll stay for the wedding. But as soon as it's over, I'll be going back."

Mark smiled, and though Kitty dreaded the idea of remaining so near to Josh for another month, she knew she'd made the right decision. The look on her father's

face told her how much she had pleased him.

But in the privacy of her bedroom, she sank onto the window seat and looked out at the gloomy winter morning. Staying for the wedding unquestionably made Mark and Ellie happy, but it also meant that now she had no choice but to accept temporary financial support from Mark. It also would give Josh more ammunition for his accusation that she was mercenary. To him, it would constitute proof that he'd been right about her.

But then, Kitty told herself impatiently, what difference did it make what Joshua Steele thought of her? It shouldn't matter at all.

A jackrabbit scurried from behind a bush and hopped around the corner of the house. The sight should have pleased her, but instead her eyes clouded and a cold, heavy despondency crashed down upon her as she realized that it did matter—greatly—what Josh thought of her. She was in love with him. The thing she'd dreaded most and wanted to avoid at all costs had happened.

\*

WHILE THE MAN from the grocery store loaded the bags into the trunk of Mark's car, Kitty rubbed her hands together, wishing she'd remembered to bring her gloves. The sky was growing steadily darker, the air colder. A Texas blue norther was bearing down upon them.

Over a week had gone by since the night she'd last seen Josh, yet not a waking hour had passed without her thinking of him. And each time she did, Kitty's pain swelled afresh, raw and stinging.

She loved him... there was no getting around that fact. And there was no getting around the fact that in the time he'd been away—on business, her father had said—there had been no softening in him, for the silence had been piercingly loud.

Kitty was thoughtful as she drove home. Josh's silence all week told her plainly things between them were at an end. It was just as well. Neither of them knew how to trust, and without trust, any relationship was doomed.

A strong wind whipped across the plains, whistling at the car windows, and the sky was an intense, angry blue. The air was growing colder by the moment. By the time she reached the house, the first raindrops were falling.

Juggling her handbag and two bags of groceries, Kitty reached the kitchen door. Before she could turn the knob, the door swung open. Mark, on his crutches, leaned against the door to hold it open while she entered.

"I'm glad you're back," he said. "The weather reports say this will be a real blizzard. Red and Oakie have been at it all afternoon putting out extra rations in the pastures. They had my truck loaded with hay, all set to go over to Josh's place to do the same there,

when Red ripped his hand on some barbed wire. Oakie's taken him into town to see a doctor." Mark glanced toward the window with a worried frown. "Once that bridge of Josh's freezes over, nobody will be able to get in. Damn this leg!" he snarled in frustration. "Here I am, helpless as a baby when I'm really needed."

"Does it make that much difference?" Kitty asked quietly. "I mean, can't one of the men just go in the morning?"

Mark shook his head. "There'd still be the problem with the bridge. And if we get a hard freeze, Oakie will have his hands full here chopping ice on the water tanks and burning the prickly pear so the cattle can get enough fluids. With Red and me both out of action, he'll be overworked as it is."

"Then I'll go," Kitty said decisively.

Mark shook his head again. "No, honey. It's good of you to offer, but if you went over there now, you might get stuck, and there'd be nobody around to help you."

"I'll be fine," Kitty assured him. "I'll just sleep at Josh's house. That way I can get back into his pastures in the morning to break the ice on his tanks."

"You sure you don't mind?" Mark's gaze was admiring. "It would be a tremendous help. I'm responsible for Josh's livestock when he's away on my business, and I've been worrying myself

crazy trying to figure out how to do it."

"Of course I don't mind," Kitty said, sounding braver than she actually felt.

JOSH GRITTED his teeth as he drove across the narrow bridge. The raw sleet had already made the road slippery, and the bridge was dangerous.

As soon as he pulled up before the garage, he saw the twin beams of headlights off in the west pasture. Red and Oakie must be putting out feed, he decided, but what puzzled him was why they'd waited until dark to do it.

Josh was exhausted. He'd been up early for a business meeting before rushing to the L.A. airport to catch his flight to Dallas. He'd originally planned to stay there overnight. But when he'd heard the weather reports, he'd decided to come home at once. If the storm was as severe as it was predicted to be, Mark's ranch hands would have all the work they could handle on the Winters ranch without having to worry about his place too.

Tired as he was, Josh drove around to the barn, threw several bales of hay into the back of his truck and set out across the pastures to help.

When he approached the other truck, he was astounded as his headlights picked out the slim figure wrestling a bale of hay up to the edge of the truck bed. It tipped over the side, and only then did

Kitty turn and look toward the lights.

"Oakie, is that you?" she called out. "That was my last bale."

Josh got out and walked toward her, stepping into the light. "No, it's me," he said. It was all he could do to keep from sweeping her into his arms. He'd thought of her night and day for the past ten days, loving her, hating her, wanting her, being furious with her, and now here she was. "Mind if I hang around and help?" he asked. "I brought a load of hay."

"Good." Kitty sighed, betraying her exhaustion. "I don't think I'd have the energy to go back to the barn and load more. We've still got the south and far west pastures to do."

Josh nodded.

While Kitty drove, Josh rode in the back, tossing out the hay and hopping to the ground periodically to open and close gates. They finished the task much sooner than she'd believed possible.

Finally Josh climbed into the heated cab beside her. His clothes were soaked, and he shivered as he leaned toward the heater's vents, rubbing his hands. "Home, James," he said lightly.

TWO HOURS LATER they had finally thawed out. First there had been coffee and hot baths, followed by steaming bowls of soup. Now a lovely fire blazed in the living room and, nursing drinks, each of them dressed in a robe, they sat

on large floor pillows before the fireplace.

They had worked hard to get past the intimacy of their circumstances by talking of safe, impersonal topics. Josh discussed his trip with her, explaining some of the finer points of Mark's business dealings, while Kitty told him about the wedding plans that were under way, the crises that kept cropping up.

Kitty shook her head. "The honeymoon's a whole different battle. Mark wants to take Ellie on a three-month trip around the world. She thinks three days on South Padre Island ought to do it."

Josh laughed heartily and Kitty's heart lurched. The skin around his eyes had crinkled into tiny wings, and his smile—well, no other man could possibly have a better one, she thought.

She looked into the leaping flames in the fireplace and reminded herself to be sensible. There was always a tomorrow to be reckoned with. Moreover, her thoughts trooped on grimly, it was quite apparent Josh didn't share her chaotic feelings. For the past half-hour they'd sat near enough that they could have reached out and touched each other, yet he seemed oblivious to her.

Kitty had no idea how much of a strain it was on Josh to simulate indifference to her. Here she was, isolated with him from the rest of the world on a savagely stormy night, looking utterly beautiful and

desirable. His entire body ached for her, and it took every ounce of self-restraint he possessed to keep from touching her.

Josh got quickly to his feet and said, "Give me your glass. I'll make you another drink."

Kitty shook her head. "No, thanks."

Josh sighed and set his own glass on the lamp table. "I don't really want another one either," he admitted. "What I want... is you."

Kitty tilted her head to look up at him, then closed her eyes. "Oh, Josh," she said weakly.

Josh was angry at giving himself away when he'd been so determined to say nothing, to do nothing. Kitty's eyes remained closed, her silent message unmistakable. She was saying no, loud and clear.

Josh swallowed, and turned away. "It's all right," he said, keeping his voice as casual as he could manage. "You're perfectly safe. I don't intend to bother you with any unwanted attentions when you can't run away from me."

Kitty opened her eyes, shocked at the inflection of pain she'd recognized in his voice. All at once she knew she couldn't let this moment end. Tomorrow she could be sensible again.

She scrambled to her feet and choked out, "Josh, I... I want you, too."

Josh groaned, and when he turned, opening his arms, Kitty stepped into them.

"You're driving me mad," he murmured against her soft hair. "You keep me in such a state of uncertainty. You want me; then you don't. Now you do again. Why have you changed your mind?"

Kitty shook her head. "Ask me something I know the answer to," she said faintly. "I've been trying so hard for both our sakes to stay aloof, to keep a safe distance, but I can't let go of you."

They kissed and a fireball of passion exploded between them. Instantly they were both alight, their blood leaping hotly and their flesh burning with desire. She arched toward him, naturally, instinctively, as his hand stroked her back and hips.

Josh looked deeply into her eyes, passion glittering in his own like sunlight on silver. Then he bent, wrapping one arm around her back, another behind her knees, and he lowered her gently to the rug.

Slowly, as though there were all the time in the world, Josh made love to every inch of her. As he kissed the thrusting peaks of her breasts, or stroked her tender, smooth thighs, his own ecstasy thundered louder, responding to the wild frenzy that ruled Kitty.

They came together as naturally as they breathed, flowing together into a river of completion. Strong currents tossed them up, lifting them to the heights of exultation. The foaming waters of life and loving burst forth in a shower of

magnificent splendor, powerful, intense, inexorable and utterly consuming.

Josh could feel her heart thudding in that final moment of bliss, and for a long time afterward he simply held her. She was a part of him, heart and soul, and he wanted to go on holding her forever.

Kitty, too, was reluctant to draw away. She clung to him, holding him tight, as she buried her face beneath his chin, pressing her cheek to his moist chest.

"I've never been this happy before," she admitted recklessly. "Never." Her hand traced a circle across his back.

Josh stroked her shoulder. "Neither have I." He lifted his head to look into her eyes and his smile was tender. "You know we're going to have to resolve this thing somehow, don't you?"

Kitty's hand stilled. "Yes," she said after a moment. "But I don't want to think about that now."

"Why not?" Josh asked gruffly. He pulled away from her and rolled over to his side. "You can't just get on a plane and go back to Chicago as though all this hasn't happened...can you?" His eyes darkened as he waited.

Kitty was chilled now that his body no longer shielded hers. She sat up and reached for her discarded robe. "Why are you doing this?" she demanded. "What do you want me to say? That I'll stay here indefinitely and have an on-again, off-again affair with you—

whenever we happen not to be fighting?"

Josh heaved a deep breath. He stared down into the fire. "Maybe I just want you to tell me that what's going on between us has some importance, that it warrants a bit of consideration before you just toss it all away."

"All right, all right!" Kitty was no longer reasonable at all. Defensive and angry, her voice was shrill. "I care. I care a lot. But that doesn't change anything. You're just as paranoid about getting serious as I am! We're both too suspicious, too afraid, too quick to argue. I can't see anything but trouble ahead between us, and who needs it? Who needs it?" Her voice broke again and she buried her face in her hands.

Josh went cold all over. His eyes were hard and emotionless as he watched her sink to her knees before the fire.

He said in a flat voice, "You're right. Who needs it? What I need, you could never give."

IT WAS THE intense cold that awakened her. The pain of the night came back to assault her as she slipped a heavy wool sweater over her head. There'd been the lovemaking—so glorious, so wonderful and fulfilling—followed by the dreadful quarrel.

The evening had ended with Kitty going to bed alone in Josh's room while he bunked on the living room sofa. There she had lain awake for hours, wishing he would

come to her and end the intolerable distance that had come between them, yet knowing that he wouldn't.

Now, besides being cold, Kitty felt dull and achy from the tears she'd shed the night before. She went into the bathroom and flipped the light switch, and only then realized why there was no heat.

She washed sparingly in the icy water and then headed toward the kitchen. When she passed through the living room, she saw that Josh wasn't, as she'd supposed, still asleep. There were discarded blankets piled haphazardly at one end of the sofa, and cold, dead ashes in the fireplace.

In the kitchen she found his brief note: "A power line snapped during the night—no electricity or heat, but you can use the kitchen stove because it's gas. I've gone to check on the cattle. Don't leave until I have a chance to sand the bridge."

Mentally shaking herself, she tossed away the note and then busied herself. Kitty slipped on her coat and went out the back door. The leaden gray of the sky contrasted sharply with the white frosted earth. She hurried to the woodpile and trudged back to the house carrying a load of firewood in her arms.

Inside, she coaxed a fire into being.

By midmorning, she was pleased with her accomplishments. On the stove, a hearty beef stew sim-

mered. At eleven-thirty she made a pot of coffee, just in case.

It was twelve-thirty when Josh entered the house, and he looked exhausted. He rubbed his hands together. "Lord, but it's cold out there."

"Go sit in the living room," Kitty said. "There's a fire and I'll bring you some coffee."

Josh inhaled deeply and almost, but not quite, smiled. "What's that smell?"

"Stew." Kitty crossed the room to the stove and poured two cups of coffee.

They went into the living room, where Josh lowered himself wearily to the sofa. He looked too exhausted to move. Kitty brought their plates of food into the living room.

"Thanks," he said as she set his plate in front of him on the coffee table. At that moment Josh coughed. It sounded as though it came from deep in his chest.

Kitty said, "You must have taken a chill last night when you got so wet, and working outside in the cold this morning has just aggravated it. You ought to be in bed. You need rest."

"I'm fine," Josh snapped. "And I sure don't need you hovering over me and acting worried just like a... just like a wife, for God's sake!"

Kitty stared down at her plate of food.

There was a loud clatter as Josh dropped his fork to his plate. "Damn it, I never seem to do any-

thing right where you're involved." His voice was bleak. "I've been acting like a jerk, I know, but I can't seem to help myself. It's easier, I guess, than loving you."

Kitty's hand fluttered to her throat. Wild elation surged through her. She at last felt she had come home. Now she could finally let go of the past and take a chance on the future. She got to her feet and went toward him. "Josh," she began softly, "I..."

He turned, and there was no responding warmth in his eyes.

"I was awake half the night thinking," he said, "and you were right all along. Nothing can come of this insanity." He rubbed a hand across his forehead. "You're a city person. I'm a country man. We can never fit into each other's lives."

Kitty bridled. "Damn you, Joshua Steele! How many other women do you know who would've gone out in that storm last night to feed your cattle?"

"I didn't mean it like that," Josh explained patiently. "You've got grit. But let's face it, Kitty. You weren't raised for this kind of life." His hand swept around. "If there's not a drought, there's a hard freeze like this one. If your cattle don't die of that, they're liable to get killed off by disease. If that doesn't get them, then there's a glut on the market and you end up in the hole. Even when you can manage to squeeze out a profit, there's always the worry about next year

and the year after. I can't...I won't ask you," he said flatly, "to share the hardships of too much work and too little money. You'd only end up hating me."

There was a tiny silence. "In other words," Kitty said at last, "you're saying you don't want to marry me."

"I'm saying I *won't* marry you. I want you, but I intend to do what's best." Josh shrugged. "You've said all along you intend to go back to Chicago, so why should I make a fool of myself by even asking you to marry me just to give you the pleasure of refusing?"

"And what if I didn't?"

Josh laughed grimly and shook his head. "I've just told you it wouldn't work out. I saw how miserable my parents' marriage was, and since then I've seen Mark's wife walk out on him and my own fiancée throw in the towel. This sort of life takes a toughness that you almost have to be born with. So let's not kid ourselves, okay? It just isn't for you, any more than city living would suit me."

"Fine," Kitty snapped. She felt betrayed. "There's no way in this world I'd even dream of marrying a man who thinks I'm a fine plaything, but not worth marrying! Well, I hate you for that!"

Josh paled. "I didn't mean it like that. You know I didn't."

"No," Kitty said sadly, her anger suddenly spent. "But it doesn't matter anymore." She tossed her

head in proud defiance. "Would you mind doing me a favor and see whether the bridge is safe to cross, while I get my things together? I'd like to leave now."

\*

"WHAT IS IT, Kitten?" Mark asked over dinner. "Your mind is a thousand miles away."

Dinner had been spent in almost complete silence, but Kitty hadn't even realized it. Nor had she realized, until Mark jolted her back to the present, that she'd scarcely touched her food.

But then, that seemed to be the norm today—preparing meals she didn't eat, performing chores she hardly recalled doing, moving and speaking and working in a vacuum of despair. She had barely even cared when the electricity came back on late in the afternoon.

The knowledge that Josh loved her had been magnificent for one brief moment—before he'd killed all hope, all joy. He'd been so implacable that she hadn't dared say she loved him, too. Now she was glad she hadn't. It was easier this way; at least she still retained a tiny degree of her pride.

It was ironic how things worked out. She'd been the one who was reluctant to commit herself, to give their relationship a chance to grow into something important; yet when she was ready to alter that, Josh was the one who'd backed away.

"Kitten?"

Kitty looked across the table at her father. Concern was evident in his gentle gaze, and that was her undoing. She blinked hard and said tremulously, "Dad... I hate to disappoint you, but I... I just don't see how I can stay until your wedding, after all."

His blue eyes were thoughtful and knowing, and he amazed her by saying the one name that was inscribed in her heart and mind: "Josh."

Kitty's eyes widened. "How did you know?"

Mark smiled wryly. "Only my leg is broken, sweetheart, not my eyesight." Mark's hand tightened over hers. "Feel like talking about it, sweetheart?" Mark asked gently. "I mean about what's really wrong between you?"

Kitty met his gaze, and the love in her father's eyes warmed her, melting some of the ice around her heart.

"Everything's so twisted up," she began huskily. "In the beginning I put Josh off because I was afraid of being hurt again, of being cheated on and dumped again. After the way Bob treated me, and what you did to Mom—" Mark winced, and she rushed on hastily, "Please, I'm not trying to hurt you now, honestly. Only to explain. All my anger over you and Bob put me off close relationships with men. I convinced myself that all men were the same, that I was better off without them. So when this thing happened between Josh and me, I was afraid. He wanted me to stay,

here a few months, to give us time to get to know each other and see where our relationship was headed." She shrugged expressively.

"And you said, 'Thanks, but no thanks,'" Mark surprised her by saying.

Kitty gave him a wistful smile. "That's right. So, of course that hurt and angered Josh. At the same time, he's had this fixation that because I'm from the city, I must be very spoiled and materialistic. I've never been able to convince him otherwise."

"That stems from the bad time he had with his fiancée," Mark told her.

"I know. Josh is judging me by what she did the same way I once judged him because of Bob. You see how ridiculous it all is? How many hang-ups we both have? We're a mess!"

"I just wish you two could look beyond your noses and see that the only thing that's really important here is how much you love each other."

Kitty shook her head. "We love each other," she said sadly, "but he's convinced himself that I'd be miserable here."

She sniffed, fighting tears, and Mark said thoughtfully, "I guess this means you'll really be leaving soon."

Kitty nodded. "As soon as I can schedule a flight."

As MARK entered the house, carefully manipulating his crutches,

Josh asked, "Isn't Ellie going to come in?" He could see her sitting behind the steering wheel of her car.

Mark shook his head. "No. I can't stay long. I wanted to speak to you privately. I came about Kitty."

Josh froze. "What about her?" Then, suddenly anxious, he blurted, "Has something happened to her?"

Mark nodded. "You happened to her." He smiled gently, but his words were firm. "My daughter is very unhappy and you're responsible for it. That doesn't please me, Josh."

Josh turned away from him. "Stay out of things that aren't any of your business, Mark."

"Kitty is my business," Mark answered sternly.

Josh whirled. "Oh, I get it," he said sarcastically. "After all these years, now you're playing the part of the doting, protective father and that gives you the right to interfere in my concerns!"

Mark winced. "Okay, I deserved that, but yes, you're right. It does give me the right to be concerned."

"The hell it does!" Josh exploded.

"Maybe I should remind you," Mark said with a sudden touch of frost to his voice, "that I'm still your employer. I intend to say what I came here to say, and you're going to listen."

Fury darkened Josh's face. "I just quit!" he snarled roughly. "Now get out of my house."

Mark went on as though the outburst hadn't occurred. "You look as miserable as my daughter does, and I don't like that any better. Why don't you end this foolishness before you wreck both your lives?"

Josh's lips flattened over his teeth in a grim smile. "That's exactly what I'm doing—trying to keep from wrecking lives."

Mark shook his head. "You're sure going about it in a peculiar way." He paused, then went on quietly, "She's leaving on the three-ten flight out of Dallas."

Kitty, leaving so soon! Josh was shaken by the news. He'd never see her again. But then, that was what he wanted, wasn't it? What was best for them both?

"I see," he murmured at last.

"Stop her, Josh," Mark urged softly. "You need her, and you're a damned fool if you let her go."

Josh's jaw clenched. "You don't know what you're talking about!" he said flatly.

"Don't I?" Mark challenged. "After being a loser in love for so many years, I'm an expert on the subject. I've learned that it takes effort to make a relationship work...on both sides. Love isn't enough. If you really do love Kitty, then you're as big an idiot as I was when I did nothing to stop her mother from walking out on me. Kitty's like Jeanne, loving and

loyal and faithful. If you lose her now, you'll lose her for good."

"Don't you think I know that?" Josh asked harshly. "But I can't give her the things another man might, the things you can. I don't want her to feel deprived, and I sure as hell don't want my wife depending on her father to give her the luxuries of life!"

Mark chuckled. "Ah-hah! I thought we'd get down to the truth. If having a lot of money and living lavishly were important to her, do you honestly think she'd be hurting right now? She'd be congratulating herself on escaping a close call. Don't forget, Josh, she's seen the mess I made of my life in the past. I'm living proof that having more money than you need doesn't guarantee happiness."

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SMARTLY DRESSED in a navy wool suit and a crimson blouse, Kitty waited inside the passenger lounge at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport for her flight to be called. Mark and Ellie waited with her.

It had been a strain to keep up polite conversation. She often found herself looking straight into Mark's or Ellie's eyes, honestly trying to pay attention to whatever was being said, but her unhappy thoughts kept returning to a man it was unlikely she would ever see again. She was so oblivious to everything else that not once had she caught the frequent exchange of worried glances between the couple.

She was impatient to get on the plane, to be in the air, to be away from Texas. When she got home she would get back her old job at the exercise studio, perhaps take a night course of some kind and look up her friends. Activity was what she needed, a ceaseless round of it.

Kitty looked at her watch. She opened her handbag, about to remove her ticket and boarding pass, when suddenly two strong, masculine hands gripped her arms and she was lifted from her seat.

Her handbag dropped to the floor as a familiar voice said urgently, "Kitty, I have to talk to you!"

"What are you doing here?" she gasped. Her mouth was dry. She'd longed for this last goodbye, but now that it was here, she couldn't face it. It would be too hard to endure. "There's nothing left for either of us to say. It's all been said already." She caught her lip between her teeth.

"Attention, ladies and gentlemen," a loudspeaker blared. "We're now boarding Flight seventeen, nonstop to Chicago."

"Let me go," she said in a low voice. "That's my flight."

Josh shook his head. "You're not getting on it."

Kitty glared at him. "Have you lost your mind?"

Josh grinned. "No. I think I've finally found it. I love you and I need you and I've come to beg you to marry me."

Kitty's eyes widened. "Did... did I hear you right?"

"Passengers seated in rows ten through . . ."

The rest of the speech was blocked out by Josh's urgent voice. "I'm a hard worker, Kitty. I swear I'll make the ranch pay off. I'll make you proud of me and give you everything you deserve if only you'll marry me. And," he added almost whimsically, "if Mark will give me back my job."

"Give it back?" Kitty looked from Josh to her father with confusion. "Did you fire him, Dad?" she asked in disbelief.

Mark grinned broadly. "Actually, he fired me—for sticking my nose into places it didn't belong."

Josh lifted a hand and gently turned Kitty's face so that she had to look at him again. "Mark told me what a fool I'd be if I let you go because of my pride. Kitty . . . darling, I love you. You must belong here after all, because otherwise why would my house be so empty without you? My *life* is empty without you. I know you've got doubts because of what happened in your first marriage, but it would never be like that with us. All I want in the whole world is the chance to love you every day for the rest of my life. If you can just bring yourself to stick out the rough places with me, someday I'll be able to give you all the nice things you ought to have and—"

Kitty lifted a finger to his lips. "Josh, don't you realize by now that all I need is you? Just the se-

curity of knowing that, through good times and bad, you love me and will be there for me—that's all the riches I could ever want. I love you. I just want the chance to be with you and to share together whatever the future brings."

Josh sighed and his arms slid around her, drawing her close. "Oh, God," he murmured just before he kissed her. "I came so close to losing you."

Their kiss was long and deep, a confirmation, a promise, and it blocked out the entire world. Only when it ended and they heard Mark and Ellie's laughter and applause did they remember where they were and that they had an audience.

"Suppose we should try to beat Mark and Ellie to the altar?" Josh asked in a low voice. "Or how about a double wedding on Valentine's Day? After all," he added with a tender smile, "Cupid kept on slinging those arrows at us until we got the message."

Kitty's throat tightened and she laughed huskily. "He did manage his task pretty well, didn't he? I can't think of anything I'd like better than to marry you on Valentine's Day—the same day my father at last finds his real happiness too."

Arm in arm, eyes glowing with the brilliant light of their future, they turned toward the smiling, older couple.



**SANDRA  
KITT**

**Only with  
the Heart**



Cathy Donnelly wanted to spend some time on her own in Florida to "find herself" as a writer.

But a chance encounter with a compelling stranger called Travis Hoyt changes her outlook on life—and love—forever.

The rain left crazy spots and tracks on the windowpane, creating patterns far more interesting than the street scenes beyond it. After all, what could be said about a dreary rainy day? Actually, thought Cathy with a deep sigh, quite a bit. Poems and songs had been dedicated to rainy days as Cathy knew, befitting a would-be writer. But for the moment her imagination was busy convincing her that the fluttering in her stomach was all nerves and would soon go away.

A door opened, and a tall, thin, middle-aged black woman wearing half-framed glasses walked out, reading several sheets of paper. She looked over the occupants of the brightly lit room, and her eyes settled on a slight figure, drawn into herself, staring out the window. The younger woman had a crop of short curly dark hair that bunched over her forehead and curled shorter around her neck. The nose was short and pert, and the mouth bow-shaped. The skin was smooth and clear.

"Catherine Donnelly? Will you come with me, please?" The older woman smiled reassuringly and turned back to her office.

Cathy took the chair indicated and sat quietly, for the moment her

curiosity directed toward the woman sitting opposite her.

The woman's long, thin face was a rich cocoa in color, with just a bit of lipstick and no other makeup. Her thick hair, almost jet black, was pulled back and up into a soft twisted bun. Her dress was a simple plaid shirtdress. Cathy guessed her to be in her mid-fifties, but her face was unlined, making it doubly hard to read an expression. Except for her mouth, which seemed always to hold a gentle smile, and her eyes, which were direct and alert.

"I'm Elizabeth Harris. Sorry I kept you waiting."

The huge, appealing dark eyes were raised, and softened into a brief smile. "I didn't mind waiting," Cathy said evenly. "I'm just surprised that the other doctor sent me to you."

"Dr. Bennett said you were a new patient." Elizabeth spread some pages over her desk. "Of course, he didn't know all of your medical history. And he couldn't find anything wrong that he could help you with," she finished carefully. "Why don't you tell me how you've been feeling lately. That way I can fill in the rest of my report and tell you the findings."

Cathy blinked and moistened her lips. She was feeling uncom-

fortable right now, the way she had for weeks. A cross between feeling hollow and feeling too full. "Well, I started out just feeling very tired. I'd come home at night, go right to bed and sleep straight through. But then all the next day I'd still be tired."

"What kind of work do you do?" Elizabeth interrupted.

"I'm an assistant editor with a small publishing house." Cathy raised a rueful brow. "That is, I used to be. I moved here recently from Baltimore. I'm taking a year off to work on a couple of books."

"Oh! Are you a writer, too?"

Cathy shrugged. "I don't know yet."

"And when did you start feeling so tired?"

"I guess...when I was preparing to leave Baltimore. I'd say a month ago."

"How long have you been in Florida?"

"Almost three weeks. I'm still settling in...and still feeling tired."

Elizabeth made a notation and scanned down a page. "How else have you been feeling?" she continued.

"Sick to my stomach—no matter what I eat. And sometimes feeling tight here...." Cathy ran her hand over her midriff. "Several times I've been dizzy, and—" She stopped.

"Is that everything?"

There was silence as they looked speculatively at each other. Cathy's probing dark eyes scanned the

other woman's face. "You know what's wrong, don't you?"

Mrs. Harris sat back in her chair. "Preliminary test results show that you're almost eight weeks pregnant."

The words were now out, and Elizabeth Harris braced herself for the reaction. But Cathy only stared blankly at her as if she had gone completely crazy.

"P-pregnant? But that's—impossible! I can't get pregnant!"

"You mean, this is a bad time for it to happen?"

"No, I mean it's not supposed to happen—ever. I've known since I was fourteen. I—I had appendicitis. It ruptured. I had an infection, and there was damage to other organs. I was told that—I'd probably never be able to conceive...." Her voice trailed off.

"Probably..." Elizabeth said. "But not absolutely."

Cathy stared at her. "But I've never had cause to doubt that."

"You mean, you've never used any protection?"

"No, I didn't. But I—I've never had to."

Elizabeth understood fully. This was complicated. Everything that had happened to Catherine in the last two months was totally new and, Elizabeth guessed, unexpected. Cathy was unprepared for the realities that now faced her.

"And...you're sure?" Cathy asked. Elizabeth nodded.

"Almost positive," she responded gently. "But as I said, it's only a preliminary test. There are

several others we'll have to do, plus a complete medical workup."

The voice went on and on—gently, but right out of Cathy's head. Now there was a buzzing sensation and a sense of almost being separated from her body.

For twenty-six years she'd been protected and cared for by her retired professor father and an older brother—six years longer than she would have liked. And there was Brian, who'd always been part of the package, who was safe and predictable. He would treat her well and take further care of her. She would be above reproach as the wife of a promising young lawyer hoping for a political career—once she worked out the absurd need to be creative and find herself.

Brian had been respectable, and respectful. With him she dared not explore the curious sensual warmth between them. It had never been permitted to blossom. The curiosity was to be assuaged by someone else....

"One of the things we haven't talked about is what you want to do now," Elizabeth was saying.

Cathy gave her a sad smile. "Go on with my life."

"Well, of course. But what about right now?"

Cathy frowned. Her mind still had not gotten her beyond the bare facts of being pregnant.

"What are the choices?"

Elizabeth leaned forward. "You could have the baby. Because of that earlier medical problem,

you'd have to be watched very closely, but you could probably bring the baby to full term.

"You could have the baby and put it up for adoption. Or—" Elizabeth held her gaze—"you could decide to terminate the pregnancy."

"You mean...an abortion?" Cathy murmured.

"Yes."

The color drained from Cathy's face. She'd never thought, in her whole adult life, that she'd have to consider having a baby. Now she had to consider if she wanted it or not.

"Cathy, I realize you've been hit with a lot of information today. There's a lot to think about. You may want to talk to friends and family, although the decision must be your own." Elizabeth smiled. "You may just want to be left alone for a while."

Yes. She wanted to be left alone. She wanted some time to cry....

"Here are my office and home numbers." Elizabeth passed a paper to her. "I hope you'll call me if you have any questions. Or even if you just want to talk."

Time to be scared and time to feel...

"Will you go back to Baltimore?" Elizabeth asked.

"No. I'm going to stay here. There are things I had planned to do, and I want to try to do them, anyway," Cathy said.

"Then remember that there's help here if you need it. And a friend?" the other woman told her.

Time to decide what to do—how to go on...

And, of course, there was Travis to be considered, although she had not seen him in two months. She had not expected ever to see Travis Hoyt again.

\*

IT WAS JUST after she'd won a heated argument with Brian and her brother, Chad, that Cathy needed some time to herself. Her widowed father had recently passed away. Since she was nineteen until his death, Cathy had been daughter, housekeeper, nurse and companion. She'd loved him dearly, but concentrating on him had allowed her little time for the normal pursuits of a young woman. And before she and Brian decided on any commitment, she wanted the chance to belong just to herself.

Unfortunately, Brian, in arguing this point, only strengthened her determination to take a year off alone. It was not as if Brian desperately loved her. He just didn't think her behavior was proper.

So Cathy, at twenty-six, had left home to travel south to Florida. She'd subleased an apartment near the University of Miami, a few blocks from Biscayne Bay and the beach. She'd left samples of her writing with three local publishers, hoping for free-lance work, and set off to explore the area.

Cathy had taken a day trip by bus down U.S.1 to Key West,

where Ernest Hemingway had spent eight years writing stories that became legend. There she hoped to find her own inspiration.

The trip from Miami began with a drizzle of rain. But Cathy didn't really notice. The scenery was almost all seascape, and spectacular.

Cathy declined the organized tour on the Key West Conch train and opted for exploring on her own. The town was an odd slapdash mixture of very old and almost new, the architecture highly individual, ranging from the stately and ornate to ramshackle cottages. There were seedy little side streets and dank alleys and an assortment of colorful local personalities. It was a wonderful place to hide or be lost in.

It was only by luck that Cathy found herself on Malloy Square at just the time of sunset. The street was crowded with the local Conch residents, tourists and people hawking their wares.

And then, just as the sun slid below the horizon, Cathy realized that having wandered so far and wide in the town, she was no longer sure where to catch her bus back to Miami. She tried to retrace her steps, but it began to rain, hard and sudden, the way summer storms do. She felt the water begin to seep through her clothing.

Searching frantically along one deserted street, Cathy settled on the dubious interior of a tavern, as opposed to getting wet to the skin. Inside it was small but much nicer

than the outside indicated. It was dimly lit with old-fashioned kerosene lamps. There was sawdust on the floor, and a length of bar occupied by three men hunched over drinks. There were several small tables, one with two men talking in low, intense voices. At another table sat a lone man whose yellow slicker was dripping with water.

Cathy hesitated for a moment, but glancing at her watch, saw that it was almost seven. She had probably missed the bus. Cathy moved to the unoccupied end of the bar and stood waiting silently.

"What'll it be, lady?" the bartender asked.

"I'd like to know where I can catch the bus back to Miami," Cathy asked evenly.

"Three blocks up on the other side of Duval. But not until tomorrow. The last bus to Miami left more than two hours ago."

"Is there any other way to get back tonight?" she asked.

He shrugged. "You could get a cab over to the airfield. Maybe you could catch a flight back. But you might as well wait till morning."

The door opened again, and a burly giant staggered in, closing the door against the driving rain.

"Made it back, Joe. It's bad out there. I nearly drowned walking the last two blocks! Hope you kept my beer cold!" His gait was unsteady, indicating that he'd been drinking earlier. The bartender set a beer before him and continued on to Cathy, setting a steaming mug before her.

"It's on the house. That'll warm your insides while you decide what you're going to do." He walked away again before Cathy had a chance to thank him.

There was a movement to her left, and Cathy swung her head to meet the bleary, lecherous look of the big man.

"You look like you could use a little company!" he slurred.

Cathy inched away. "No, thank you," she said politely.

"Ah, come on! I'll buy you a drink. Better'n that stuff Joe gave you."

Cathy looked directly at him. "I'm not alone," she improvised, her apprehension nonetheless rising.

"Oh, yeah?" he scoffed. "Who you with, honey?"

But then an arm insinuated itself between Cathy and her burly admirer, and a large hand picked up her mug.

"Back off, Hudson. The lady's with me," a quiet but deeply masculine voice said.

Cathy's eyes widened to see the face of the man who'd spoken. It was the stranger in the yellow slicker.

"She's with you?" Hudson asked. "I didn't see her come in here with you, Travis." He was ready to argue.

"You're drunk. How would you know?" was the response as Travis turned back to his table, taking Cathy's mug with him.

She stood hesitantly watching as Travis lowered himself to his chair

and took a long gulp of his own drink. He raised his eyes to her. They were an eerie, beautiful gray-green, like the sea.

"Sit down," he drawled. "You're supposed to be with me, remember?"

Cathy sat down, noticing the brown nylon duffel bag under his seat, lumpy with its contents. From the looks of him and his fatigue Cathy decided he'd just returned from somewhere. Was he a sailor, too? She took an absentminded sip of her drink and grimaced. It was very tart.

"It's not supposed to taste good," the deep voice said. "Joe calls it tea Tasmania. Keeps you from getting a chill."

Cathy felt a growing sensation of excitement as she sat opposite this man, with his slightly scruffy but very male appearance. With her usual tendency toward imaginative speculation, she guessed he was some sort of modern-day adventurer from the sea.

Cathy forgot all about getting back to Miami, as she played out her fantasy. It was a few seconds before she realized that Travis was studying her with equal directness.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" he asked. "This isn't a place for a woman like you."

Her eyes lifted challengingly. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Travis's eyes wandered lazily over her body. "You look lost... and too innocent."

"Well, I'm not! Lost, I mean," Cathy said pertly. "I wanted—" she began, but stopped as an ear-piercing crack of thunder rocked the air. Instinctively, she reached to cover her ears, her frightened eyes catching sight of a curious expression on Travis's face.

Color infused Cathy's cheeks as she realized how foolish an old childhood fear must have made her look. To cover her reaction, she took another sip of the tea.

"I—I wanted to see what Key West was like. I've read a lot about it," Cathy managed. "I'm a writer."

Travis groaned. "I suppose you want to be the female Hemingway. You're a little young yet. Life hasn't given you enough experience, love, hate or surprises."

Most of that was true. Cathy wrinkled her nose. "Hemingway is not one of my favorite writers."

"Who is, then?"

She shrugged. "My favorite book so far is *The Little Prince*."

He chuckled dryly. "May I ask why?"

"Because he was an explorer, and he could always see the things that were really important with his heart."

There was a curious silence when she stopped talking, as Cathy and Travis looked at each other, the one so young, the other so world-weary. It was in their eyes, curiously locked to each other as the rain continued drearily outside.

"Do you have any idea how many would-be writers, artists,

philosophers, loafers, come here for inspiration? There's no inspiration here. There's nothing here."

Cathy frowned. "I'm just trying to stay alive."

He confused her with his odd combination of indifference, and attachment to some raw emotion and feelings. She didn't know how to respond, yet felt reluctant to leave him alone to his personal miseries. But Travis ordered yet another drink, and Cathy sensed correctly that he didn't need or want her sympathies or company that night.

"Well, I should be going," Cathy said.

"And where is it you should be getting to?" Travis asked.

"I have to see if I can get back to Miami." But Travis shook his head.

"Not in this rain. You'd do better finding a hotel for the night, although you probably won't have much luck there, either. This is peak tourist season."

"Well, I can't stay here all night."

"Joe wouldn't mind."

"But I would!"

Cathy stood up and gathered her jacket around her. She took a red bandanna from her purse and tied it in a triangle over her head. She looked once more at Travis. "I thank you for your help before."

"No problem. By the way, who was it I rescued?"

"My name's Cathy Donnelly."

"I knew a Cathy once," was all he said.

Cathy opened the door, and hunching her shoulders, quickly stepped outside. She could barely see for all the rain, but she headed quickly toward the main street two blocks north. Before she reached the corner, her shoes were soaked, as was her hair through the thin red scarf. Beads of water began to trickle down her face and she pulled back into a doorway, huddling dismally while she considered her next move. For a frantic moment she wondered if Joe would indeed let her sit in his tavern through the night.

Down the block, the tavern door opened and closed. Panic seized Cathy as she was positive it was Hudson coming after her. A long shadow was cast in front of her on the sidewalk by a lamplight. It moved in her direction. It was Travis, and Cathy's relief made her momentarily speechless.

"You didn't get very far...and you're going the wrong way," Travis drawled.

"I—I'm sure it will—stop soon," Cathy chattered.

"No, it won't," he said. "Not till sometime tomorrow. Maybe not even then."

A moan of misery escaped Cathy. She was very cold.

"Well, you can't just stay out here," Travis said. "Come on...you'll stay on the boat tonight."

Cathy's feet and toes were numb by the time Travis reached the waterfront. He jumped casually onto the deck of a rather box-shaped

structure that was bargelike and two-storied. That was all Cathy noticed or cared to, as her own acute discomfort made her more concerned with just getting out of the rain.

Travis fiddled with a lock and a heavy bar plate fastened across the entrance. Then, applying a little muscle, he pushed until the door slid open to show a dark interior. The room slowly flickered into dim visibility from two low-ceiling fluorescent lights.

They stood staring at each other, neither looking in the least appealing at the moment but each suddenly aware physically of the other. Cathy felt a thread of excitement snake through her that was very much connected to the male presence standing so confidently opposite her.

"You'll have to get out of those wet clothes," he said and with one hand snatched her jacket. With the other he grabbed her wrist and walked toward a dark open doorway, through the next room in the dark into yet another, where he switched on a light. He left her while he rummaged in a wall cabinet. "Here," he said, thrusting an armful of things at her. Then he pushed past her, closed a screen to the room and left her.

"Thank you," Cathy said in soft bewilderment.

Travis had given her two good-sized brown towels and a red T-shirt with DIVE printed across the front in white.

A violent sneeze finally spurred her into action and Cathy rubbed her chilled body briskly. It felt wonderful to be dry.

Cathy shook out the T-shirt and slipped it over her head. It stopped above her knees by a good three inches. Travis was certainly taller than she, but this shirt had to belong to a much bigger man.

Suddenly, the screen was jerked back, making her gasp. Travis had on fresh dry jeans, and a towel around his neck. He held the screen aside, waiting for her to precede him into the next room. Travis took the wet pile of clothing from her and nodded to the room they'd first entered.

"There's a heater against that wall. Sit down while I hang these up."

"I can do that!" Cathy protested at once, trying to take them back, not wanting Travis to handle her intimate garments. But as if reading her thoughts, he grinned.

"I don't mind."

Cathy had no choice but to give in.

"Nice," she heard Travis croon softly. "Very nice."

"I'm sure this isn't the first time you've handled a woman's... clothing!"

Finished with his chore, Travis moved toward the doorway of the still-dark center space. "It's not...but it's the first time I missed the pleasure of removing them myself."

Cathy had no quick answer for him as he continued to gaze openly at her. His eyes dropped momentarily to her chest where the word DIVE undulated, giving definite form to her curved flesh. She hugged her arms around her body.

"Coffee or tea?" he called, turning on the light in what proved to be the galley.

"Coffee," Cathy answered, remembering how her tea had been enhanced at the tavern. She had a flashing image of her brother and what his reaction would have been to finding his baby sister preparing to spend the night with someone she'd met a few hours before in a bar. Yet she was certain that this stranger would do her no harm. Beyond baiting her with her obvious lack of experience, Travis didn't seem impressed with her at all. Cathy wondered what kind of woman Travis liked.

The rain was still falling heavily outside, and there came the sudden distant sound of thunder. Cathy's body went rigid as Travis came in holding two steaming mugs, and sat opposite her at the table.

"Drink this. It should put some color back into your cheeks." Travis took a deep swallow, and Cathy did the same, nearly choking as she recognized the taste of the drink she'd had at the tavern. Travis chuckled.

"What is this habit of putting liquor in tea or coffee?"

He shrugged. "It takes longer to get drunk this way," was his flip

remark. But his humor quickly faded. "And sometimes it makes it easier to sleep...easier to forget." Travis blinked. "And puts one more in the mood—"

"I'm not seducible," Cathy said.

"I know," Travis responded dryly. "You're armored to the teeth in innocence." He put down his mug sharply and began a rough toweling of his hair.

Cathy silently puzzled over his observation while idly sipping her coffee. She wondered if she really seemed so transparent and young that no one took her seriously. With a kind of detached curiosity she watched Travis's arms and his chest as he continued drying his towel-covered head.

His firm, molded chest was completely void of hair and smoothly muscled. He was not particularly broad in the shoulders, but he was lithe and well proportioned. His stomach was flat and also muscled, his hips lean and narrow.

Then she noticed that there was a brutal scar along the inside of his left forearm, and a subtle discoloration on the back of both hands and arms, as if he'd healed from third-degree burns. It made her curious.

There was another clap of thunder, this one much closer, and Cathy was out of her chair, her daydreams dissolving. She gasped as the hot coffee sloshed over the cup rim and onto her arm. Travis looked up at her in surprise, but

before he could say anything, the thunder came again. The cup slipped from her hand and landed on the wooden floor, spilling all over her feet. This time she did cry out, but Travis was out of his seat, reaching for her.

"Hey," he began softly, "take it easy!"

He tried to put his arms around her, but Cathy resisted in her fright, pushing him away.

"It's all right," Travis tried to tell her, but the words were lost in yet another roar of sound.

Cathy stood stone-still. She was aware of a hand touching her, pulling her gently. She allowed herself to be turned, and a pair of warm, strong arms slowly circled her. And when the sounds came again, she gave herself up to the protective shield, burrowing her head into his chest.

Travis's bearded chin rested against her forehead, and Cathy's cheek was flat against his smooth chest, listening to his even, steady heartbeat. He wasn't the least afraid. He was so sure, so calm, while her heart pounded.

She had no idea how long they stood that way, as she became aware of other sensations. Her firm, rounded breasts pressed against Travis. His arm rested low on her back. Her bare thighs pressed against the denim of his, and she knew that the T-shirt had risen up when her arms went around him.

"You picked a bad time to be in Florida," Travis said, his voice

deep and crooning. "The summers are always stormy, and steamy. Sometimes I think Florida sunshine is a myth!" he added dryly.

"I—I didn't know...." Cathy whispered, lulled by his closeness.

Travis didn't move until Cathy was calm and gently pulled away from him. She had always been embarrassed by her fear of violent storms and had fortunately not experienced many growing up in Baltimore.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I—I've always been afraid—"

"There's no need to explain," Travis said. "Everyone's afraid of something."

"The cup. Did I break the cup?"

"Forget the cup. I think we should go to bed."

Cathy just stared at him.

"We'll both feel better for a night's rest," Travis said. "You sleep in there. I'll sleep on the couch out here."

Cathy came back to life. "There's no reason to give up your—"

"Good night!" Travis interrupted firmly.

Feeling as if she were being punished, Cathy murmured good night in return and quietly left the room.

Sometime in the night a sound reached her through her sleep. A sudden loud cry of anguish brought her eyes open and her head up as something hit the floor in the front room. But then it was quiet. After, there were other sounds, but softer.

"Travis?" Cathy whispered softly, but got no answer. She got out of bed and cautiously moved in the dark toward the front room. "Travis?" she tried again but still no answer.

In the dark Travis seemed to be fidgeting and twitching on the couch. He lay on his back, his chest heaving in deep erratic breathing. Despite the slight chill of the night, his chest was glistening with sweat. His arms were bent stiffly at the elbow and held rigidly, his hands spread as if bracing against something.

Cathy was apprehensive, thinking that he was in pain. But it became obvious that he was deep in the throes of a dream.

"Mitch! Hold on...I...I can't. Oh, no!" The words were almost sobbed.

Cathy approached the couch and cautiously sat on its very edge, not sure what would happen if she tried to awaken Travis.

His hands were still held out from his body. Cathy slowly touched them and tried to bring them down to his side on the bed. He resisted for a moment, but then the arms relaxed and dropped heavily.

"I can't, Mitch.... It's so hot...."

Without realizing it, Cathy began her own murmurings. "Travis," she called in a whisper.

"It's gonna blow!" he groaned. "Get out...get out!"

"Travis...shh!" Cathy brushed the damp thick hair from his forehead.

Suddenly, Travis was completely awake and alert, half sitting up so quickly, Cathy gasped in alarm. Her eyes caught his wild look and held. Travis returned the look blankly, and she was not sure he was seeing her at all. "Travis, you're dreaming," she murmured. "It's only a dream."

Travis let out a deep, stiff sigh; then, with another groan, he collapsed heavily back on the bed, breathing to gain control. After a few minutes the only sound was the rain. Cathy got up and quietly made her way back to her own solitary bed.

CATHY QUIETLY left her room and walked into the galley the next morning. The smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the air, and there was an already-used mug on the counter. But the space was empty, as was the front room, and it, too, was deserted.

Cathy turned her thoughts to getting dressed quickly as she began to feel the inadequacy of the oversize T-shirt, but when she reached for her clothing on the rack, she found it almost as wet as the night before. She would still not be able to get back to Miami—at least not for another few hours, while she figured out how to dry her things.

At that moment the door slid open as Travis walked in, loaded with a number of small packages.

His slicker was shiny with water, as were his beard and dark hair. And it was evident from the slow, amused look he gave her that his restless tossing of the night before was not foremost on his mind. She blushed under his steady gaze.

"They're still wet!" Cathy said in exasperation, holding up her sweater and skirt.

Travis looked a little hesitantly at her things, then back at her. "Yeah, well... I think I kicked the stand over in my sleep last night. The wind shifted, and rain came in the portholes."

It was a perfectly reasonable explanation. "Oh..." was all she could murmur.

"Cheer up," he said. "It could be worse."

They stared at each other for a long silent moment while the distance that had existed between them the night before melted away. They were left with just each other, in a situation they'd neither looked for nor planned on, and were both unprepared to handle.

"Is there someone waiting for you back in Miami?" Travis broke the silence.

Cathy blinked. "No. No one," she answered honestly. There was Brian, but he was in Washington.

"Then you're in no particular hurry. Stay and have some lunch."

"Lunch?" she asked blankly.

"It's nearly one o'clock. A little late for breakfast, wouldn't you say? I thought maybe you were going to spend the day in bed." He grinned wickedly at her. "All in all,

not a bad idea, but I've got some things to do. We don't seem to be getting any hot water."

Cathy leaned against the door frame.

"Can you cook?" Travis asked, pulling out a pot.

Remembering all the meals she'd cooked for her father and brother since she was nearly fourteen, Cathy laughed softly. "Of course I can cook!"

"Good. You can make the lunch," he said easily. "But first I guess I'd better get you something to wear. Too bad..." he murmured, stepping past her.

Cathy made a face at his retreating back but moved to the counter and poked through the assortment of foodstuffs he'd purchased. In a minute he was back.

"I think these might fit you," he said. Cathy turned to find him holding up a narrow, small pair of jeans. One knee had a rip in it, and a back pocket flapped loosely, but they looked like her size. There was also a plaid shirt, a pair of socks and a red wool crewneck sweater. It was obvious that the clothing didn't belong to Travis, nor was it women's clothing. But before Cathy could ask about it, he spoke. "I suggest you put these on. They will keep you warm."

Travis moved swiftly past her, and grabbing his slicker once more, left the craft.

Without benefit of underwear, she dressed in the borrowed clothing; the jeans were snug around the hips and a little long in the legs but

otherwise fit. The shirt was also a little tight across her chest, flattening her breasts. When she had everything on, she fluffed her hair and went to make lunch. She decided that grilled cheese sandwiches, soup and salad would do. After twenty minutes, when Travis still hadn't returned, she wrapped the sandwiches in foil, keeping them warm in a toaster oven. Then, with nothing else to do, Cathy got a pen and pad from her purse and sat at the table to begin a poem.

She was so deep in her work that when the door opened fifteen minutes later, she was startled. Travis stood with a scowl on his face.

"Lunch is ready," she said quietly.

Travis nodded. "I'll wash up—" he began. "What are you writing? A diary? Something about me?" he teased.

"I—I was working on a poem...about clouds," she said.

"What about clouds?" Travis moved to the sink and ran the water.

Cathy shrugged. "I was thinking how clouds take on different shapes. How there are other beautiful ways to see them."

"They're not always pretty, you know. They also bring storms," Travis said with meaning.

"So you watch clouds, too?" She smiled.

"Sort of. I chase them for the National Weather Service. Take my word for it. There's nothing

romantic about them." Travis washed his face and hands as Cathy dished the soup into bowls. "When I'm up in a plane tracking them, I can only wonder how much damage will be done when they finally burst over the land. That's hardly pretty and romantic!"

"You probably know nothing about romance, either!" Cathy muttered petulantly.

Travis scowled at her. "Let's eat!" he said roughly.

They were seated in uncomfortable silence, concentrating on their food. Cathy gave Travis furtive looks, establishing again that he was a handsome man, even if somewhat truculent. They both finally relaxed.

After lunch, he helped carry the dishes to the galley. "I have to go work on that furnace," he said, "or there'll be no hot water and your things will take all night to dry." He moved around her toward his raincoat and a tool chest.

"Can I help?" Cathy asked at once. "I can at least hold your tools."

"Why not," he finally agreed. "You might as well earn your keep." Travis located another slicker.

It was almost dark before he let out a deep sigh, closed down the unit and gathered his tools. "Well, that's all I can do. Let's go see if it works."

Within an hour they had hot water. Cathy applauded his good work.

Travis gave her a mock bow.  
"And since I did most of the work,  
I get to take the first shower!"

"That sounds fair," Cathy said,  
laughing. "I'll make dinner."

Cathy began the makings of spaghetti carbonara. As Travis headed toward the shower, she glanced over her shoulder and saw that he had only a bath towel wound around his narrow hips. Again she was made aware of the lean, firm body, the sculptured smooth chest and his long muscled legs covered with dark hair.

By the time Travis had showered and dressed, Cathy had dinner ready. They sat down once more to eat, but this time in an atmosphere that was oddly charged and electrified. It was as if the coming night had closed in tightly around them and they were again confronted with being alone together. Suddenly, there was a heightened sense each had of the other.

Travis watched her openly during the meal. He liked what he saw, and she was attractive—just so damned young!

"I suppose you should stay the night," Travis said.

Cathy's cheeks colored. "I—I suppose I'll have to. My clothes—"

"Yes, I know."

"I'll sleep on the couch," Cathy offered. "It's much too short for you. You kicked the clothing rack over in the dark, remember?"

A wicked gleam sparkled in his green eyes. "We could share the

bed," he suggested, but Cathy knew he was teasing her again.

"No, thanks. The way you sleep I'll end up strangled!"

"That's true. I could be a killer for all you know." His eyes stared hard at her.

"I don't...believe that," Cathy whispered, as Travis got up and stalked slowly toward her, the lights throwing his face into shadows.

"You should," he said roughly, his hand suddenly grabbing her chin.

Cathy's dark eyes widened as she stared up at him and felt his hand tilt her head back.

"I could hurt you, Cathy."

Cathy swallowed, and her lips parted to speak, but Travis's mouth instantly covered hers in possession that was total and unexpected. His tongue explored boldly, while a free hand settled on her breast to gently squeeze and massage through her borrowed clothing.

Cathy grew still. And although she didn't respond, neither did she make any protest. She just let Travis have his way, and when he finally released her, her expression was bewildered.

"I don't believe you'd hurt me," she whispered. "I—I don't believe you would hurt anyone."

For a moment longer Travis stared at her. "There are many kinds of hurt, Cathy," he said almost bleakly. "Let's hope you never have to find out about them."

Then he bent to kiss her again, this time a light touch that was exploratory and curious, so gentle that Cathy felt herself responding. But Travis let her go.

"I'll clean up while you take a shower," he said.

Cathy swallowed and nodded, going off slowly, automatically, to get her towel and T-shirt.

CATHY FOUND that she could not sleep well. She tossed and turned fitfully on the narrow couch, half expecting to hear a repeat of the night before. Oddly, when Travis did begin to have his dream again, it was several minutes before his moaning anguish got through to her.

Cathy didn't hesitate at all this time in sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Travis . . ." she began softly.

"I'm trying . . ." Travis gritted between clenched teeth. "Mitch! I—I'm trying!"

"Travis, shh . . . it's all right. Wake up."

Cathy wiped his forehead. He moaned, turning his head away. Cathy touched his chest, and the skin was wet and hot. She received a kind of shock. It completely stilled her for a moment in surprise. It was . . . something from Travis. Cathy felt it through her fingertips, and it rippled quickly through her body. Cathy's heart contracted, and her concern deepened. Everything that Travis was experiencing became important to

her—personal. It was as if she could feel his pain.

"Oh, Travis," she whispered. "What is it that hurts you so?"

Very slowly Travis began to relax, though his breathing remained hurried. Then, suddenly, his eyes flew open and he stared fixedly at Cathy for a long moment.

"You're awake now. It's just another dream." She stroked his jaw. Slowly, Travis put his hands on Cathy's arms and rode the cool, slender length of her limbs to her shoulders. The movement made her shiver, because it felt so personal and caressing. Then he began to close his arms around her, bringing her down against his hard damp body.

"Cathy . . ." he murmured hoarsely.

She resisted, but she was no match for Travis's male strength.

"Keep still! I won't hurt you. I promise," Travis whispered roughly. "I just—Just let me hold you for a while."

His request threw Cathy off guard, and she let her body relax against him. He settled her comfortably in his arms and for a long time they lay that way, until his heavy, exhausted breathing told Cathy he was asleep.

It was sometime much later in her half sleep that a languid warmth assailed Cathy's limbs. Her body moved instinctively closer to the source, responding to hands upon her skin. She thought of Brian, except that Brian had

never stroked her that way. Still, a hand, large and purposeful, was sliding up over her rib cage to a breast. Sighing, she arched her back in sleepy delight as her nipple was stimulated into a hard little peak. She moved her hips and encountered the pressure of bold, taut flesh. Identifying it brought her awake and into the melting throes of desire. It was Travis who held her, not Brian. The muscles in her stomach and loins curled and tightened in a sensuous arch that made her feel limp all over. Yet the delicious feelings were suddenly pulled in check when Cathy realized that Travis was now attempting to remove her T-shirt.

She tried to cross her arms, but his hands shifted to her bare hip and bottom. Cathy gasped. "Travis!"

"Cathy, stop fighting me," he said, as the T-shirt was tossed to the floor.

"Travis, you...you said you wouldn't...hurt me," Cathy said breathlessly. The mind wanted to stop him, remind him that they were strangers, but her traitorous body tingled all over from his touch and seemed more inclined to let him continue.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?" he drawled. He turned his head, trying to reach her mouth. She turned away at first, but after a moment, melted toward the feeling he generated and with a soft, helpless sound she went limp. She began to enjoy his kiss, and also to some extent examine and compare it.

Travis now found her mouth soft and answering. His tongue encouraged her to respond, and with a sigh she parted her lips to give him entry. The joy of being kissed with such expertise vanquished the last of her resistance, and her own dawning need eliminated her doubts, as well.

It came to Cathy, perversely under the circumstances, that Brian had never made her feel quite this way and that his kisses had been rather pedestrian. A kind of heady euphoria seemed to be gathering within Cathy, frightening and certainly new, and she could barely catch her breath from one sensation to the next.

Travis suddenly released her wrists, and automatically they wound themselves around his neck. With his mouth locked to hers, Travis concentrated on searching out the rest of her trembling body. A hand covered her breast, the fingers again massaging the nipple, then moved down to her stomach, around her hip, to curve fully under her bottom and draw her tightly against him.

Travis separated her knees and shifted his weight. He dragged his mouth to her jaw, her neck and throat.

"Travis..." Cathy moaned weakly, knowing now what was to happen and suddenly frantic that she should say something to him. But he reclaimed her mouth and moved to bring them together. His thrust was direct and sudden. They both stiffened with shock then and

lay still for a long shuddering moment. Travis murmured to her, but it was too late to go back and impossible not to go on.

Cathy moved inexpertly but suggestively and with excruciatingly slow cadence they became synchronized. She was suddenly aware of every nuance of him. She could feel Travis, sense him all around and through her. She felt suspended and unreal as their heartbeats and sighs and touching were offered and matched one to the other.

Travis caressed her until she was shaking and silent tears of surprise squeezed from her closed eyes. She found herself clinging to him as if she might fall. But she didn't. Moving deeply but slowly, Travis purged himself of some emotion, and finally, he sighed deeply, holding her sweetly at last in his own ultimate satisfaction with her.

Overwhelmed and surprised by the depth of what had happened between them, Travis had an instinctive need to kiss her tenderly. He felt that he had not simply joined with her to make love and then separate at the end. They had joined bodies, touched souls, destroyed part of the past, given rise to a new beginning....

And in some as yet inexplicable manner, they had saved each other's lives.

\*  
CATHY HAD returned to Baltimore and thought about Travis almost constantly, trying to convince herself that theirs had just been a chance encounter and was unimportant. But now everything was different. She was forever tied to Travis no matter what decision she made about the baby.

Even on that last sultry night in Key West, Cathy had wondered at having found Travis, only to realize that in the morning she would have to leave.

It had been just at the point that night ended but dawn hadn't begun that Cathy became aware of Travis's hands gently gliding over her body again. She murmured something incoherent as he reached for her, kissing her mouth awake, then pulled her beneath him, weaving his fingers into her soft dark hair and staring intently into her rich sable eyes.

"It would be so easy to love you," Travis whispered, watching the dreamy sparkle in her eyes. His hips pressed urgently against her, and he started to love her again. This time, free of the bad dreams, he led her to complete ecstasy, too.

In the morning sunlight, Cathy left Travis still deeply asleep and undisturbed. He never moved as silently she dressed and retrieved her belongings, then pulled the thin blanket over his legs and waist. She wondered when was the last time he'd slept as soundly as he did right now, as she was leaving

him, unable—unwilling—to say goodbye.

Cathy knew now that she'd have to tell Travis that she was pregnant. But suppose he didn't remember her or didn't care? Suppose he wasn't even there? What if he'd left Key West?

CATHY HAD NO trouble spotting Travis's houseboat as she walked down the length of pier that would put her closer to it. She noticed at once that all the portholes were open, though there was no sign of anyone. Cathy stood staring, almost hypnotized by the scene and all at once terrified of seeing Travis again. Now she noticed other things. A shirt hanging over a line, a bicycle leaning against the side. It was a bright red two-wheeler, meant for a child.

Cathy stared at it and felt the ground go soft under her feet. All the hopes that she hadn't yet clarified in her head died, but before she could move away, a woman stepped from the entrance on the main deck with a pail in hand. She was, perhaps, in her mid-thirties, a little taller than Cathy herself and larger of frame. Her shoulder-length hair was blond and straight. She was earthy-looking—and very attractive. And she moved around the craft with a familiarity that said she belonged there.

Unaccountably, tears began to blur Cathy's vision. She turned and began to stumble away, hoping she wasn't going to be sick.

"Can I help you?" came a husky feminine voice.

Cathy turned guiltily at the sound. The woman was squinting against the sun at her.

"Were you looking for someone?" she asked now. "It's so easy to get lost along here. What's the name of the boat you want?"

Cathy was fascinated. The woman was so pleasant and friendly. "I—I don't know," she answered softly.

The woman angled her head slightly and looked Cathy up and down. "Are you looking for Travis?" she asked with bright curiosity.

Cathy swallowed and nodded.

"He's not here right now, but he'll be back soon." The woman looked at her watch. "Actually, I expected him over an hour ago. He took the kids fishing."

"Are you...Mrs. Hoyt?" Cathy suddenly asked softly.

The woman blinked in surprise. "Why, yes! I am!" Then she frowned. "Do I know you?"

Somehow Cathy found it in herself to smile. For a wild moment she was tempted to say, "No, but we have something in common." Instead, she merely shook her head.

The woman shrugged. "Well, you're more than welcome to wait. I'm sure they'll turn up anytime now."

Cathy was tempted to stay just to see Travis's reaction to her while in the presence of his family. But

instead, she took a step away.  
"Thank you, but no."

"Well... who shall I say was here? Don't you want to leave a message?"

Cathy kept moving, still smiling stiffly, still shaking her head. Her eyes were blurring again. "He rescued me in a storm... a few months ago. I—stopped by to say thanks."

"Rescued you? Yep! That sounds like my Travis!"

*Her Travis.* Cathy's stomach sank further.

"Wait! What's your name?"

"Cathy Donnelly...." The woman slowly stopped smiling, squinting again at Cathy, as if to see her more clearly.

"Cathy?" she repeated curiously. But Cathy only waved briefly and walked away.

Somehow she made it back to her car and got out of Key West, driving automatically. All the way to Miami, tears rolled down her cheeks, spotting her blouse and slacks. Her quiet sobs went unheard and unsoothed in the car. Cathy hurried to get back. She was desperate to reach Elizabeth Harris at the women's center. But Elizabeth was away at a three-day convention in Atlanta.

THE GENTLE clicking of the typewriter filled the room, filled her head, blocking out thoughts, images and feelings. This part of Cathy's creative writing could almost have been done by rote. She had written an essay about moth-

erhood. It had been Elizabeth Harris's idea.

On top of her traumatic return to Key West, waiting three days for Elizabeth to return to Miami had just about done Cathy in. But she had told Elizabeth all about Travis and how they'd met. Finally, Cathy had croaked out tearfully that he was already married, with children.

At first, Elizabeth gave no advice at all. She just asked a few questions and made mental notes of the answers. Her last question had been a pointed, "Do you want an abortion?"

Cathy's great dark eyes had looked steadily at her. "I don't think I can do that. I don't know what kind of mother I'm going to make, but I have to try."

Elizabeth had half expected a tirade against a man named Travis, about duplicity and infidelity, accidents and mistakes. But Cathy had involved only herself in her decision. That was a positive sign.

And then Elizabeth had done two things. She'd first insisted that Cathy see a counselor so that it would be clear to the administration of the center that she understood her decision to keep the baby. And second, she was to write an essay, anonymously if she preferred, on what motherhood meant to her. It would appear in a newsletter for women registered at the center.

Cathy had not realized she'd stopped typing. She blinked as she saw she'd overshot her margins

and would have to redo the page. Sighing softly in exasperation, she turned off the typewriter. With the setting sun it was growing dark in the apartment, and she switched on a desk lamp. At the same time, a sharp twist of pain passed through her lower abdomen. She laid a slender hand flat to her stomach, wishing the cramps would stop. Elizabeth said they would, but Cathy had yet to return to the center for the rest of her examination since deciding against the abortion.

When there was a loud knock on her apartment door, Cathy slowly got up from her long, narrow desk and walked to answer.

At the door, stood a fairly tall, dark man. His face was strongly chiseled, his cheekbones prominent, as was his jaw. The chin was square. He was clean-shaven, although the shadow of his beard was discernible. His mouth was wide and sensually full but at the moment formed a hard, straight line.

There was much about Travis's face that had remained hidden when Cathy had first met him. But for as long as she lived, she'd always remember those eyes. Sad sea green eyes, with cloudy gray flecks throughout. Cathy stood absolutely mesmerized, her heart thudding painfully in her chest.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" she asked simply, her voice more steady than she thought it would be. "How... did you find me?"

"Finding you was a royal pain," he said. "I think I must have called every apartment-leasing agency in Miami and every major bank. I figured you had to have an account here."

Cathy was amazed at his ingenuity, if indignant. "They shouldn't have told you anything. That's confidential!"

Travis raised a brow. "I didn't think they'd believe I was your brother," he said. "So I told them you were a runaway wife."

Cathy's mouth dropped open. "You didn't!" she said.

"I did!" he replied. "And I think you know exactly why I'm here."

Cathy's neck and cheeks flushed pink. "I—I don't know why you're here. How could I?"

Travis looked thoughtfully at her, his eyes missing none of the emotions playing over her face. "I'd rather not discuss this standing here. Can we at least sit down?" he asked softly. Cathy nodded and padded barefoot into her living room, which also served as a dining area and her work studio.

She picked the least comfortable chair to sit on, then sat straight back, tense, on the edge of it. Travis dropped gracefully to the love seat, opposite Cathy.

"You're pregnant, aren't you?" he said.

Cathy stared at him. "You... you're wrong. I—"

Travis smoothly interrupted her denials. "You came looking for me

to tell me. But having found where I was, you left again. Without saying a word."

Cathy looked down at her fingers, twisting nervously in her lap. "It—it was foolish to go back." She shrugged. "I don't know why I did." Her cheeks were bright pink spots in a face that was curiously pale.

"Then it's pointless to ask if the baby's mine," he said.

Cathy's return of his intent gaze was unflinching. "Totally pointless," she confirmed. "And you wouldn't be here if you believed there was any doubt."

Their eyes held for a long minute. "I hope you're not in the habit of conducting, er, your relationships in this way," he said cruelly. Cathy glared at him.

"That's an awful thing to say! There's only Brian. I—" Cathy stopped. How could she justify this situation?

Travis raised a brow. "Brian? He's in for one hell of a surprise."

"He's not going to know. It—it's none of his business," Cathy said.

"Then you're not serious about his feelings, either. And I bet he was your high school sweetheart!" he smirked.

Cathy frowned. "You don't understand!" she said helplessly. "This wasn't deliberate or—or careless." She gestured, words catching in her throat. "It—it just wasn't supposed to happen...."

But Travis's expression stated that he was unsympathetic.

"You don't have to worry. I won't ask anything of you."

Travis grew alert. "What do you mean?"

Cathy kept her back to him. She hugged her stomach. The cramps had returned. "Because of your family."

"What the hell has my family to do with this?"

"I—I didn't say anything to Mrs. Hoyt!" Cathy said.

"Melinda?" Travis blinked at Cathy in confusion.

*Is that her name?* Cathy thought dimly. "Haven't they been hurt enough?" Cathy forced herself to look into his face and couldn't keep the tears from welling or blurring his image. "It's all right. There's nothing you have to do or say." Her voice broke, and a few tears rolled down her cheeks and past her quivering chin.

Travis stared at her for a long time until, slowly, understanding set in. If he hadn't been so relieved, he might have laughed at her mistake. The thing that stopped him, however, was sudden further insight into her thinking. She had not actually been angry at the possibility of his being married but personally upset that if he was, then he was committed to and therefore in love with someone else. "Oh, Cathy!" Travis muttered in awareness, and he stood up and pulled her into his arms.

Cathy was stiff for a second, but Travis did not give her a chance to pull away, bringing her against the

warm firmness of his chest and thighs. He liked the feel of her against him. He remembered it. She fit well, her curly hair brushing his chin.

"Cathy... Melinda Hoyt is not my wife. She's my sister-in-law. The boys are my nephews, Jonathan and Matthew."

Cathy was still for a moment, and Travis wondered if she'd heard him. Then tentatively, she raised her hands and rested them on his bare chest. Travis fingered her curls.

"Obviously, Melinda neglected to tell you that," he said ruefully.

Cathy nodded. "Yes, she did."

Travis wished fervently now that he'd been at the houseboat when she'd arrived. "I'm not married, Cathy." He paused. "But—I used to be." He could feel her reaction. "It was for a very brief time a long time ago. Do you understand?" he asked. Travis made it clear this was all he was going to say about it. It was no longer important.

"Yes," Cathy mumbled.

"I've done some lousy things in my life, but I'm not that much of a bastard!" Travis added. Cathy looked at him for a long, poignant moment, her eyes bright with an appeal that she was unaware of. Travis absently reached to touch her cheek.

"The baby is mine, and I know it," Travis began again. Cathy flushed deeply and dropped her eyes. "Neither of us expected this, but now that it's happened, we should deal with it together. I

won't leave you alone. We'll talk about it carefully. But we'll do it together."

Cathy felt a surge of joy at his words, even as she still felt the need to make it easy for him. "You really don't have to stay. I'd understand if—"

"No, you wouldn't," Travis contradicted.

Cathy started to speak again, but the phone rang, startling them. Travis pushed her gently away.

"Go on and answer it. I'll make some coffee." He turned to her kitchen.

When Cathy answered and heard her brother's voice, it took several seconds for her to reply. Then mumbling a hello and acutely aware of Travis in the next room, she realized guiltily that it had been more than two weeks since she'd spoken to Chad.

"Hey Cat. How's it going? I expected to hear from you last week. Is everything all right?"

"Yes, of course. Why—why shouldn't it be?"

"You tell me! I suppose you're still getting settled. So how does it feel being out of Baltimore and on your own? Is it what you thought it would be?"

"I'm still finding out," Cathy said with a sigh. "But I'm glad I decided to get away."

"I know how you feel, Cathy. And I understand even if I do tease you," Chad said seriously. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

Cathy squeezed her eyes closed and sat down on the edge of the sofa. If only he knew.

"I can take care of myself," she told him.

"Yeah, well...just remember you can always come home," her brother reminded her affectionately.

"I will. And Chad?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for calling," Cathy said warmly.

Chad laughed softly. "Next time it's your turn to call!"

Cathy joined in the laughter. "I promise I will. Bye."

Cathy hung up the phone, and her smile slowly faded. She sat rather dejected and pensive until a glass of orange juice was suddenly passed in front of her and pressed into a limp hand. She looked up quickly, blinking away tears, and found Travis standing over her, his eyes dark and intent on her.

"Have you told anyone about the baby?" he asked.

"No." Cathy bit her lip. "Only Elizabeth Harris knows."

"Elizabeth Harris?" Travis questioned.

"She's with a women's health center. It was Elizabeth who told me I—I was pregnant."

"You didn't suspect before that?"

"I had no idea," Cathy murmured. Travis had looked at her essay while she was on the phone, and realized that there were many things she didn't know, and which

confused her. And she had come to him a virgin.

"I see..." Keeping his eyes on her for reaction, Travis then asked quietly, "And what about an abortion? You hinted in the essay that you would have one."

Cathy looked quickly at him, hesitating to tell him she hadn't meant it. "Maybe," she said vaguely.

Travis stared hard at her. "Then you don't want to have the baby?" he asked stiffly.

With a sort of moan, Cathy quickly put down the glass of juice and stood up, wrapping her arms around her body. She took several steps away from Travis. "I'm not sure what I'm doing," she murmured. She was so confused. Should she tell him she could want *his* baby? She heard Travis move to stand close behind her. Every nerve in her body went stiff and tight, and she almost couldn't breathe.

"Then don't do it," Travis said in a tight, hard voice. "If you're not sure, don't do anything!"

Cathy then glanced over her shoulder at him, having finally registered something in his voice and tone, the way he stood so alertly near her. She could feel his own tension.

Travis stood still, looking at her before coming closer and allowing his eyes to soften as they searched her upturned face. "You could marry me," he said.

Instantly, Cathy knew she wanted to say yes. She wished she could, but that would have been a

grave disservice to them both. Cathy believed in a marriage that was based on love and affection, respect, care and tenderness and not on mere convenience. His eyes looked so warm and reassuring. If only there was more to go on. What did Travis think of her? How did he really feel? Cathy lifted her chin. Whatever it was, she wouldn't have him feel sorry for her or ashamed. And she didn't need his guilt. She had plenty of her own. There wasn't enough, then, to make her say yes.

"No, Travis, I can't. It wouldn't be fair."

Travis tensed his jaw stubbornly. "And I can't let you do the other. *That* wouldn't be fair. I'm staying here until we find the right thing to—"

"The right thing!" Cathy twisted away impatiently. "Maybe there is no such thing as right!" She sighed. "Oh, Travis... There's nothing you can do here. There's no reason to stay."

"And what if I say I want to stay with you?"

"Here...with me?" she voiced naively.

Travis let out a deep breath and shrugged. "Why not?" Then Cathy's eyes stretched wide, and Travis correctly interpreted her thinking. "There's very little we don't know about each other, Cathy. We needn't be uncomfortable."

Cathy's heart lurched and changed beats in her chest, Travis's nearness imprinting itself on all

her senses. It frightened her to recognize that she was no longer ignorant of a man's desires or needs, but even more than that, that she had been awakened to her own. She'd not forgotten the closeness beyond the ultimate physical intimacy that was there between them for a few hours that night in April. Even now as she fought with a serious decision affecting them both, Cathy wanted to lose herself in his embrace, relearn the overwhelming masculine power of him and share the ecstasy that he alone had taught her.

It was crazy to want him this way, to need him. How much more complicated could their lives get if he stayed?

Now Travis was saying, "I have reconnaissance to fly for the weather service here in Miami. You can write. Somehow in between we'll work on what we should do. We have to try."

Cathy was deeply moved by his persistence. "It could take a long time," she said hoarsely.

"There's enough time to be sure," he responded, taking her shoulders in his large hands, misunderstanding her concern. "We can still be married," he said, oddly hopeful.

Cathy closed her eyes, shaking her head again. That was too much of a sacrifice, especially if he didn't love her. Travis squeezed her shoulders, giving her a little shake. "It can work! Or I'll help you if—if you just want to keep the baby. I'll stay to see you through it."

Cathy wanted to ask what happens afterward, but didn't. She searched deeply into his cool gray-green eyes, and within herself. "Is it... really so important to stay?" Then she practically held her breath waiting for his response.

Travis could see the expectancy in her eyes, the curious hesitancy. "What happens to you is important to me," he said simply, his deep voice low and caressing.

A relief such as Cathy wouldn't have believed possible swept through her. She had been so tense that her now-relaxing body started to tremble.

"Cathy..." Travis said her name, coming forward to pull her into his arms. "Don't be afraid." He soothed her with infinite tenderness, pressing her shaking body against him. Travis reached to kiss just her forehead. A hand slid up her back, holding her close. "Will you call Elizabeth? Will you tell her you haven't decided yet?"

"All right," she said softly. Cathy started to speak to tell him she'd decided to keep the baby, but he laid a finger across her lips, not wanting her to change her mind or to think about it anymore for the present.

\*

"HELLO. May I talk with Ms. Catherine Donnelly, please?"

"Yes, speaking."

"Hi, Catherine. This is Valerie Banner at *Miami Magazine*."

Cathy came instantly alert, her heart skipping a beat. "Yes?"

she mouthed, and turned off her typewriter.

"I got the piece you sent me last week. We've decided to purchase it for publication. I very much like what you've written about the transitions between childhood and being an adult. In a town of predominantly older citizens, it's a refreshing look at maturing and being young."

"Thank you!" Cathy said humbly, enjoying the praise.

"I'll try to get a check in the mail to you before the end of the week. Have you done much of this first-person-observation sort of writing?"

"No, not much," Cathy admitted. "I—I just finished a piece on motherhood and what it means to different women. It's coming out in a newsletter at the Women's Alternative Health Center."

"Umm... That's interesting. Would you be interested in writing some more stuff on the subject?"

"I'd love to write more for you."

"Tell you what. Why don't we meet for lunch and talk about it."

"I'd like that."

When Cathy got off the phone, she was so stunned she sat staring at it. She had sold her second article in less than two weeks. Closing her eyes, Cathy let out a breath of joy and anticipation. It was one thing to claim to be a writer; it was another thing to have others agree that she was one. Cathy wanted to let everyone know. She wanted to tell her brother Chad. She wanted

to tell Travis first. Brian never crossed her mind.

She hadn't seen or heard from him since the morning before. It was a strange relationship they had—and contradictory. Cathy had adjusted rather quickly to his being in the apartment, probably due to her having grown up in a household of men. But Travis was not just any man. He was someone who sparked a sensual awareness deep within her with his very presence and in whom her interest couldn't be denied. But outwardly Cathy treated him diffidently, as if keeping him at arm's length would dispel the other feelings she was developing with each passing day and keep her safe.

For his part, Travis at first spent a great deal of his time being acutely aware of her developing femininity, her slender curved prettiness and softness, accompanied by a maturing of her personality. He was also taken by her energy and imagination, by her cockeyed observations. Yet, as naive and fantastic as he sometimes found them, her ideas made him think, as they also made him impatient. He sometimes wanted to shout at her to grow up.

"One of the things I've learned in life," he reminded her, "is not to walk around with my head in the clouds, Cathy. You end up getting hurt that way." Or *hurting people yourself*, Travis thought bitterly. But Cathy had only shaken her head sadly at him.

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"Oh, Travis. You sound just like Brian," Cathy had said unwittingly. Travis stiffened in his chair. He didn't have to ask who Brian was. "You both spend so much time expecting the worst that you miss the wonderful things around you."

Travis sighed. "You don't know what you're talking about!" he muttered. "You sound just like that book you're so fond of—*The Little Prince!* How the hell can you see anything past all that—that stardust in your eyes?"

"So instead you bury your head in the sand! What's the difference between my dreaming and your running away?"

"Just what is it I'm supposed to be running from?"

Cathy looked at him for a long moment. "Whatever happened in the past that lives on in your dreams at night."

He had no response at all to her observation.

OTHER THAN the effect that her close physical proximity had on his mental, emotional and physical state, Travis slept well enough, unhampered by his dreams. There was only one night in which the terror began to possess him. But Cathy merely reached out a hand to stroke his jaw.

"Travis..." She called his name once in a sleepy murmur. He grunted softly, and slept again.

And then the next morning, the last time she'd seen him, he was making breakfast when Cathy

again approached him on the subject of his dreams. He was barefoot and dressed only in jeans, his face as yet unshaved. He was quiet that morning.

"Travis?"

"Yeah?" he answered, cracking two eggs into a bowl.

"Tell me who Mitch is."

He reached for salt and pepper, and continuing his preparations, his back to her, Travis answered. "He was my brother. He's dead now." A fork was whisked briskly through the mixture and another egg added.

"Was he Melinda's husband?"

"Yes..." came the short response. He didn't want to talk about it, but Cathy wasn't discouraged.

Thinking about how to begin, she laid the table for the two of them. In her mind she pieced together the bits of information she already had. Travis moaning Mitch's name in anguish. The burn scars on his arms and hands.

Travis divided the scrambled eggs between two plates, adding buttered toast and fresh orange wedges.

"How did he die?" Cathy asked into the tense air.

"He was killed in a plane crash."

"Were you with him?"

Travis put the plates down with a clatter. "Cat, I don't want to talk about it. Let's just drop it, okay?"

Cathy took a deep breath. "Were you?" she asked.

Cursing under his breath, Travis slammed a fist down on the back of his chair. "Yes!" he shouted. "I piloted the plane. I brought it down, and it hit a building, starting a fire. I was the one who tried to get help, and Mitch was left trapped in his seat."

"Travis—"

"You wanted to know, so let me finish, dammit! I didn't try hard enough. The engine blew, and Mitch died! I watched my brother die and did nothing about it. That's what I dream about. I'm responsible!"

Cathy let him shout at her, let him use her as a sounding board for feelings she suspected had been bottled up too long.

"No one can blame you, Travis. I know—"

"It *was* my fault. Don't you understand? I shouldn't have left him alone," he ground out. Cathy felt deep compassion and concern for him. He'd been carrying this grief around for an eternity. It explained so many things about him.

"Travis, I've seen Melinda. There was no evidence that she blames you. Does she?"

Travis sighed. "No, she doesn't. Melinda—understands. Maybe better than I do."

"What about the rest of your family? Surely the hurt and sorrow have passed?"

"I wouldn't know," he said tiredly. "I haven't been home in four years."

*Four years! My God, all that time?* was the thought that went through Cathy's head.

Travis blinked out of his reverie and focused on Cathy. Then he turned away to the bedroom.

"Travis?" Cathy called, but by the time she followed him, he had on his shoes and was tucking a red polo shirt into his jeans.

He walked past her, looking for his jacket, for his keys and log books. "My father used to tell me often enough what a lousy son I was—how irresponsible."

Cathy gasped. "Oh, Travis, that's not true!" She was frantic, wanting him to believe her. "I don't believe that of you!" He stopped abruptly and turned to glare at her.

"Then maybe you should," he said. "I haven't done you much good, have I?"

Cathy's plea for him not to go was lost in the opening of the door and its sharp closing as Travis did leave the apartment. Cathy stared at the door. Would he come back? Tears blurred her vision and spilled down her cheeks. How could his family not love him still? How could he believe that no one could? She did....

CATHY HAD SET the table for two people. This time for dinner. During the whole afternoon of reminiscing about their odd relationship, Cathy continued to believe that Travis would come back. She wanted a chance to tell him how very important he was to

her. Maybe it took the threat of his really leaving for Cathy to see that.

It was seven o'clock. Cathy's dinner, planned and prepared with newly discovered hope and love, simmered and was kept warm in the kitchen. She showered and changed into a simple aquamarine sundress with thin shoulder straps. She brushed and fluffed her hair, clipping the curls away from the sides of her face with white barrettes. She applied a bit of makeup and slipped on white low-heeled sandals. All the time she dressed she thought of Travis.

When she was all ready, Cathy sat on the love seat and waited. An hour later, as she was about to despair, a knock came at the door.

Travis stood gazing down at her. He hadn't shaved in two days, and that was evident. She wondered where he'd slept, if at all.

Travis was surprised at the change in her. Not just the pretty dress or hairdo or the bright red lip coloring that evoked an instant desire to kiss her, but there was a new calm and presence, a new strength in her.

Cathy stepped aside, and he came into the apartment. From behind his back Travis sheepishly produced a bouquet of flowers. She looked up at him, her eyes happy and bright, dissolving all of his awkwardness.

"Oh, Travis! They're beautiful! Thank you," she said in awe. She buried her nose in the lush fragrance of the flowers.

Travis braced his hands on his hips, looking her up and down. "I—I suppose you're going out?" he said.

Cathy smiled at him. "No, I wasn't going anywhere." She looked down at herself and back at Travis. "I was waiting for you."

Travis visibly relaxed. "How did you know I'd be back?"

Cathy looked into his eyes. "I hoped you would," she said. "It—it's a celebration. I sold another article today, and I think the editors want me to do more for them in the future." Then, for a moment, she became shy with Travis and lowered her eyes. "I...was waiting to share the news with you." When she looked up again, she found his eyes searching hers. She couldn't really read his expression. It could have been pleasure or disbelief. Or surprise.

Travis looked past her into the living room at the cozy table setting. Then he stepped forward and stole a gentle quick kiss from her surprised mouth. "I'll be ready in fifteen minutes," he said softly, moving off to the bathroom.

When he emerged, he was showered, shaved and freshly dressed in navy blue slacks and a cream-colored shirt. "Cathy," he began, "I just want to—"

"You don't have to explain, Travis. I understand."

Travis could really believe now that she did.

"I did worry about you last night. I—I guess you just needed time to think."

"I guess," he replied. "Cat?"

She stopped instantly at his use of the pet name.

"I'm really pleased about the article," he said, coming closer.

She laughed. "You get part of the credit, you know."

TRAVIS NOW sought to make her love him, not realizing, of course, that her feelings were already very much beyond their developing physical relationship. Cathy readily responded to him and never denied him, and this was further proof to Travis that he would have what he wanted in the end. He said as much to her.

They lay in bed one night, and Travis began to kiss her slowly and tantalizingly with the rising passion that was always the prelude to their lovemaking. Cathy wound her arms around his neck, lifting her hips suggestively and in readiness to his own bold middle, surging impertinently against her. Travis brought her to the very edge of repletion, only to withhold her final pleasure and his. She moaned and blinked in a sensual daze at him, whispering his name in a plea, confused by his sudden temperance.

"You will marry me, Cat—eventually," he said confidently, and although Travis turned her over so he could settle her back against his chest and thighs, he didn't make love to her.

Cathy looked into her lap one afternoon and smoothed a hand over her stomach. Already some of

her clothing was tight, her body giving signs in its own way, and soon they would be obvious. She was almost glad she'd promised to go to the center.

First of all she'd have to tell Elizabeth about the cramps she was still experiencing. Every time the pain gripped her, Cathy was more convinced it shouldn't be happening. She wasn't sure why, but the baby shouldn't be hurting this way. And she'd kept it from Travis, as well.

Their complete sharing of the bed, however, of the space, of their bodies, Cathy accepted, because she loved him. There was no morality involved in her thoughts. Their living together was simply what they'd agreed on in the circumstances. Also, she still believed she had no means to hold him, not even through the baby. Travis was a traveler and a searcher. He could be gone at any time.

For now, Cathy would have him and love him as he was. She found Travis's lovemaking joyous. He paced her through the stages of passion with his potency, which gave her knowledge, experience and ease with him. They enjoyed touching each other now and did so often.

Sometimes after they made love, Travis would lift himself from her trembling body to kneel between her thighs, then bend and place an almost-reverent, gentle kiss on her bent knee and thigh. It was a curious gesture, but one that Cathy al-

ways found uniquely intimate. Once he came back to the apartment early to find her typing. He pulled her from the chair, lifted her into his arms and took her to bed with him at three o'clock in the afternoon.

Travis was also highly inventive, teaching her pleasures she never would have thought of herself. When he was awakened one night with her silky back wriggling and snuggling against his chest and stomach, Travis's response had been immediate and demanding. His hand around her had stroked her hip and thighs, had gently squeezed and rubbed her breasts, until Cathy moaned, wanting him to love her. From that position he had, and from that position they'd fallen back to sleep.

And still there was a restlessness in him at times, only confirming her belief that it was just a matter of time before he'd want to leave. But Cathy could not know that his restlessness was to settle the rest of his wayward life. He missed his family—his father. He wanted to see him, make things right with him, bring Cathy home to him. But he hadn't a clue as to how to begin to bridge the gap.

It was perhaps brought sharply to mind the afternoon he took her flying. They went down to the Grand Bahamas, fifty miles off the tip of Florida, for lunch and sunning on a white, nearly deserted beach. The day was ideal. They held hands and were totally at ease with each other. The euphoria

lasted all the way back to Miami, to the apartment and as they undressed each other in preparation for making love. Suddenly, the phone rang. It was Melinda.

"Hello, Travis!" she said brightly. "How are you doing?"

"Melinda, you didn't just call me out of the blue to find out how I'm doing."

"No, you're right," she admitted. "The base called. They wanted to know when you'd be back."

"Oh?" Travis said, not totally alert.

"Something about September storms and a possible hurricane. You'll have to speak to them yourself."

"All right, thanks. I'll give them a call tomorrow. How are the boys?"

"A handful! They keep asking when you're coming back. But I'm taking them to see their grandfather, so now their minds are on getting to the farm." Travis felt a myriad of feelings tearing through him.

"That's a good idea, Mel," he said evenly.

"Travis? Do you have any messages for your father?"

"No," he said unequivocally.

"But, Travis . . ."

"No messages, Melinda. If I have anything to say, I'll say it myself. Have a good trip."

When Cathy came back into the living room after the call, it was to find a somber, changed Travis. The excellent mood of the day was lost.

When he muttered that he had to go for a walk, she didn't try to stop him, recognizing his need to be alone for the moment.

Travis returned just after she'd finally gone to bed but before she'd fallen to sleep. Acting on impulse, Cathy threw back the covers and beckoned him to her. Travis came to stand in front of her as Cathy knelt and silently undressed him. Travis put his arms around her tightly, searching for her mouth with his own, forcing it open so that his tongue could quickly find hers. Then bending her backward onto the mattress, settling on top of her, he made love to her as gently as he could, afraid that otherwise, in showing the full depth of his emotions and love for her, he would injure her.

"I need you," Travis whispered urgently against her mouth, and Cathy thought he meant for the moment and gave him what he wanted.

AFTER HER lunch with Valerie Banner, Cathy realized that she wasn't that far from the airfield that Travis flew in and out of. He would be coming in soon. She'd meet him there, and they could go back to the apartment together.

As it turned out, Cathy nearly missed him. He was already down, and heading toward the office. Travis had a sudden sense of someone behind him and turning, saw Cathy. She waved and smiled cheerfully, and Travis's heart

turned over with the overwhelming gladness he felt at seeing her.

Cathy began to feel shy under his intense scrutiny as she came up to him. Her smile became uncertain.

"I—I was in the neighborhood, and I thought I'd come to meet you."

Travis frowned slightly. "Did you walk all the way here?"

Cathy looked impish. "Almost. I left the car in front of the *Miami Magazine* building."

Travis's eyes grew dark. "Well? How did it go?"

Cathy shrugged casually. "Okay, I guess. I have a contract to do four more articles."

Travis lifted Cathy clear off her feet as he kissed her soundly. "Congratulations! Pulitzer Prize next year?"

Cathy's feet dangled. "I doubt it! I'll be happy just to get in print!" she said laughing.

They walked to pick up the car and headed back to the apartment. After parking, Travis took her arm and stood in front of her, halting her steps.

"Cat, I wanted you to know... I'm glad you came today."

"I am, too," Cathy whispered. Travis bent to kiss her softly, a kiss not of passion but of genuine affection.

"Cathy?" Her name was spoken in a shocked tone. Cathy jumped, and she and Travis turned their heads. Standing to her right was her brother Chad—and Brian.

"Wh-what are you doing here?"  
Cathy stammered, still within Travis's protective hold.

One of the men, tall and athletic, with curly light brown hair, answered first. "You said you'd call, Cathy. And you didn't. I got worried, and so did Brian," he added smoothly.

Travis had guessed at once that this had to be Chad. The resemblance between sister and brother was obvious.

"Hello, Cathy," the man Brian said tightly. He swung deadly eyes to Travis, who regarded him with detached interest.

"Hello, Brian," Cathy answered weakly, taking a step closer to Travis. Chad made careful note of the way his sister aligned herself with this stranger.

Brian suddenly made to move forward, and Chad easily put a restraining hand on his arm. "Just wait a minute, Brian," he said calmly. He didn't want any trouble. And he didn't want to interfere in Cathy's life. He just wanted to make sure she was okay.

Cathy looked up at Travis, who was still eyeing Brian. "Travis, this is my brother, Chad." Cathy looked at Brian, raising her chin a little. "And...this is Brian Radcliff," she finished.

Travis merely inclined his head.

"I don't mean to interfere, Cathy," Chad began, looking back and forth between her and Travis.

Travis took a half step closer. "Maybe I can help" came his quiet voice. "Cathy has been research-

ing information for her writing," he improvised.

Cathy blinked, beginning to feel annoyance. She didn't want Travis to lie for her. "Wait a minute," she said softly, but it was lost in Brian's sharp tone.

"On what?" he asked challengingly.

"On clouds," Travis responded.

Brian frowned. "Clouds?" he said incredulously.

"Yes, clouds!" Cathy responded to his derision. "I'm writing a book of poetry. The book you always said was foolish!"

Brian turned his displeasure on Travis. "And what does he have to do with it? Showing you what it's like on cloud nine, I suppose?"

"Easy, Brian . . ." Chad warned quietly.

"Brian . . ." Cathy began, and stopped helplessly.

"As a matter of fact, yes!" Travis's voice came bold and hard in the air, his watchfulness gone.

Cathy placed a hand on his arm and felt the hard, bunched muscles. "Brian, you have no right to talk to me that way!"

"Who has a better right than your fiancé? You belong to me!" Brian said, wretched now.

Cathy looked at him clearly. "I don't belong to anyone but myself. I didn't give myself away to you just because we considered getting married!"

Brian laughed harshly. "It's too late in any case, isn't it, since you've obviously given yourself to

him! Are you living with him as well as sleeping with him?"

Cathy blanched as Travis reacted to intervene protectively, but Brian suddenly rushed forward, swinging a fist at him, catching Travis between his mouth and nose. The impact sent him reeling backward, but he stayed upright and brushed at his face, finding blood.

Brian stood pleased and poised, ready to swing again. But this time Travis ducked and grabbed his arm as it swung past his head. What happened next was so fast and neat that no one could react to prevent it.

Holding on to Brian's wrist, Travis stepped forward and braced his free arm under Brian's in such a way that with one forceful push from his other hand, Brian's wrist was broken, and he cried out in pain. Then Travis hooked the heel of his right leg around Brian's left one, and sent him backward onto the pavement in a heap. There was an incredible silence afterward. Chad went to help Brian. Cathy also made a half move to his side but instead went to Travis, looking anxiously at his bruised face, sorry for the blood and the hurt and the whole mess.

After steadying Brian on his feet, Chad began walking back toward his sister, but his eyes were riveted to Travis.

"Let me talk to him, Cathy," Travis said.

"No! Let me talk to him. Please, Travis!"

Cathy walked over to Chad. His face was concerned and protective but not outraged. "I'm sorry, Chad. I didn't mean to make you worry. I—I didn't mean for this to happen," she said.

Chad nodded and let out the tension he was holding in. "Is everything okay?" he asked. Cathy finally smiled weakly.

"I'm fine."

"Do you want me to hang around for a while?"

Cathy's smile widened. "No. I'm old enough to take care of myself. I'm here with Travis because I want to be, Chad," she said softly, and he understood.

"I gotta get Brian to a doctor. I expect to hear from you soon." Cathy nodded meekly. Then once more he looked fully at Travis. "Take care of my sister," he said, and turned to help a still-glaring but silent Brian back to the car.

THE ENTIRE episode was like a catalyst in their relationship. The first thing that happened was that Travis and Cathy were ultimately united emotionally. They made love that evening with a passion that bordered on desperation. It began with Cathy's stripping off Travis's bloodstained shirt with the intention of washing it. But he took the gesture more personally and reached to remove her light top. The mutual unrobing became serious and hurried until they faced each other naked. It was as if now the inherent implications of their nudity, each before the other,

made them fully aware of the intimacy, the sacred meaning of their being together.

Travis looked at her carefully, his green eyes intense and bright with a light that Cathy should have recognized as love. For a long moment Travis reveled in the maturing of her body. Her breasts were a little rounder and heavier with the pregnancy. Though her stomach was still flat, the changes had added a curved softness to her hips. Cathy had been pretty before, appealing and young. Now she was totally desirable as a woman, and Travis wanted her badly.

But it was Cathy who took the initiative, again showing how she'd changed since being with Travis. She took his hand and began urging him toward the bedroom.

"Love me." Her lips formed the words softly, and Travis was too overcome with pleasure and hope to respond verbally. But he needed no further prompting, and lifting her off the floor he carried her to the room.

Travis never released her. He bent a knee to the edge of the bed, placing Cathy down and lying with her all in the same strong, fluid motion. His hands explored her body with erotic, devastatingly sensual intent, eliciting little gasps and moans. His mouth found a ripe, swollen breast, and with his teeth, he gently worried a nipple until it was hard and Cathy squirmed against him. Travis molded his hand around her bot-

tom and pulled her tightly against his aroused middle, gently and repeatedly, until Cathy was clutching and beside herself with the need for the final and complete possession.

Their joining had always been satisfying, but this was the first time their loving, the ritualistic universal dance, had brought them to the peak of fulfillment at the same time. The pure joy of it brought tears to Cathy's eyes and had Travis holding her tenderly and giving sweet little kisses to her mouth. Their physical joining was like absolution, finally clearing the way for both of them to be what they really wanted to be—loved by each other.

It was a new tenderness that extended itself around them and into the days that followed. It left them blind to important realities, even until Cathy's first trimester had passed.

The second thing happened so fast it would be weeks before the implications were fully understood and dealt with. It was the night Travis informed her he would have to return to Key West for an urgent consultation and the second of two nights in a row that Cathy hadn't eaten dinner. Travis's news had taken her by surprise, but her not eating had nothing to do with it, though Travis suspected she thought he might be leaving for good. He could think of no way to convince her otherwise than to return as quickly as possible.

Travis was sitting at the small dining table, looking over records and data of past hurricanes. His duffel bag was already packed by the front door. He looked up when Cathy walked quietly past him from her desk to the kitchen. She had on a lilac-colored sundress with thin straps. Her curly hair had been pushed up in back and pinned there for coolness. Travis started to ask her if she was all right, but she was gone before the words could be formed.

Cathy would not have heard him. She was listening to her own body. It was telling her something important by way of slowly intensifying cramps. She couldn't remember if drinking cold water had helped in the past, but getting up and walking around had to be better than sitting while her stomach twisted alarmingly. A fine sweat covered her forehead and chin. Waves of heat rushed up her neck and down again. Her hands shook around the glass. Something was wrong.

"Travis," Cathy breathed out in a thin whisper, and kept her eyes on the kitchen doorway as she tried to walk steadily in that direction. At the entrance she stopped and swayed against it. "Travis..." Cathy tried again, the pain and panic finally instilled in the broken word. Then the glass slipped from her hands to the floor. She moaned, clutching her stomach, and her knees began to give way.

Travis lifted his head at the high-pitched utterance that was his

name. "Cathy! Oh, my God. Cathy!" Travis reached her before she touched the floor, his strong arms easily breaking her fall. Her head fell back limply, and she was doubled over in pain. "Cat... for heaven's sakes, what's wrong?" Travis asked anxiously.

He lifted her and rushed with her to the bed, gently laying her down. Her knees remained tightly drawn up, her body stiff.

"Cathy," Travis called, his fear rising. But she was now beyond the ability to respond. She was ice cold despite her damp skin, her breathing deep and ragged with pain. Travis rushed to the phone and dialed the local emergency number.

"Nine-one-one. Emergency ... can I help you?"

"Yes! I have an emergency here."

"What's the problem?" the cold voice replied.

"The problem?" Travis repeated as Cathy cried out again. "God, I don't know!" he bit out savagely. "She's doubled up and screaming in pain!"

"Could be an appendicitis attack."

"No...no! Dammit, it's not that!"

"Okay, okay, buddy. Take it easy! Just give me the address and we'll send an ambulance."

Cathy cried out again, and Travis yelled, "No! Just call the hospital. I'm bringing her in!" And he slammed the phone down,

oblivious to the fact he hadn't given his name or Cathy's.

It was Tuesday in Miami, and when Travis pulled to a stop at the emergency entrance of the county hospital, the driveway was completely clear of vehicles. The glass plate doors to the building automatically slid open, and a team of three women and one man, all dressed in hospital greens, rushed out with a collapsible gurney to the car.

"We'll take it from here," the young resident said, stepping briskly between Travis and his hold on Cathy's convulsively clutching hand. Travis was forced to let go.

"I'm coming with her!" he stated bluntly.

"Are you family? Her husband?" the man asked quickly.

The muscles in Travis's jaw jumped abruptly to life. "No, dammit!" he said shortly.

The resident understood, but slowly shook his head. "Then I'm sorry, but you'll have to wait down here."

Travis paced the hall in front of the closed surgical door, not even able to hear sounds from within. And his own imagination conjured up enough horrors Cathy might be going through to justify his look of sheer fright. He could only think that she might miscarry the baby. He could only believe that it was all his fault.

His mind cleared momentarily as Travis tried to think what to do. Gratefully, he remembered the name Elizabeth Harris, the woman

at the health center whom Cathy had spoken of with such high regard. He located a nurses' station where a lone woman turned a lazy eye to him.

"Look, I'd appreciate it if you could call someone for me. Her name is Elizabeth Harris, and she's with the—the Women's Health Center, or the Alternative Center—something like that!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not supposed to do that. There are public tele—"

"This is an emergency!" Travis said tightly.

"Yes, I understand that, sir, but the rules are—"

"I don't give a damn about your rules!" Travis bit out.

"Well, since I'm alone for the moment, I don't suppose it'll matter too much," the nurse said. "What was the name again?"

Elizabeth Harris was not at the center, but since a nurse was calling, her home phone number was given.

Fortunately, she was home and surprised when Travis introduced himself.

"Is something wrong with Cathy?" Elizabeth asked.

"I brought her in fifteen minutes ago. I—I don't know what's wrong, and they wouldn't let me go with her," Travis said bitterly. Then he stopped, calming himself. "Mrs. Harris, I have to be with her. I belong with her."

"Yes, of course, you do," Elizabeth agreed. "Don't worry. I'll be there in twenty minutes," she said.

THE HOSPITAL was deadly quiet, Travis thought grimly. At four thirty-seven in the morning, the only sounds were the occasional squeaky heels of rubber-soled shoes on tile floors or the faint rattling of bottles as medicine was given to patients.

"Travis?" came the sound of his name. He looked quickly over his shoulder and saw Elizabeth Harris standing with two cups of coffee in her hands. Travis stood and walked slowly toward her.

Elizabeth smiled kindly at him, and at once Travis relaxed. She extended one cup to him. "Here, I think you'd better drink this, or you're likely to be the next emergency!" she said softly.

Travis smiled. "Thanks, Mrs. Harris."

"Elizabeth," she corrected easily.

"Is, ah, is she going to be all right?" Travis asked.

"Cathy will be fine. I've talked to the doctors. They'll permit you to stay with her now, since she has no family here in Florida. And she's clearly not in any danger. Now, let's go sit down and talk."

They both sat quietly for a while drinking their coffee.

"I suppose you know Cathy lost the baby," Elizabeth said softly.

Travis nodded silently, staring into the coffee cup.

Elizabeth sighed. "Actually, she didn't lose it. They had to abort, Travis. It was a tear in her cervix—it was that that created all the cramping pain. And of course she

began to hemorrhage quickly. She lost a lot of blood. On top of that, oxygen was cut off to the fetus."

"I understand," he whispered hoarsely. Elizabeth could see his hesitation and waited patiently. "Look, I—I made love to her the night before and . . ." He paused. "Did I do something to hurt her?" His voice was pained.

"No," she reassured Travis, "it's highly unlikely—"

"But not impossible!" Travis countered shortly.

Elizabeth searched his face and saw the doubt and self-derisive accusation in his eyes. "That's certainly true," she conceded, "but what happened last night has been developing a long time. And I recall telling Cathy that if she proceeded with the pregnancy, there might be problems."

Travis nodded and looked at Elizabeth. "Did she tell you she wanted an abortion?"

Elizabeth sighed. "I told her at the beginning it was something to think about. But Cathy didn't even consider it seriously. She never attempted to arrange for one."

Travis averted his eyes. "That was probably my fault. I pressured her into waiting."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't think she was ever really sure what to do. And now it doesn't matter."

Travis wanted to tell Elizabeth that now it mattered more than ever. But he wanted to tell Cathy first.

IT WAS NEARLY noon that day when Cathy slowly dragged open her eyelids, only to have them close again. Something was holding tightly to her hand. Her fingers felt numb, her arm stiff, and she tried to move them. At once the hold on her hand tightened. There was a tube in her arm, and beyond it she blinked drowsily at Travis's face. He slowly came into focus. He seemed tired and grim, his eyes rimmed with red. Cathy blinked and fought to stay awake.

Travis tried giving her an easy smile and reached out to stroke gently down her pale, cool cheek. "Hello, sleepyhead," he whispered in a husky voice.

Cathy wanted to answer. She wanted to return his smile and the pressure of his fingers, but the only things that moved were her eyelids. Cathy tried to move her mouth, but nothing came out. And she felt sore—a low-level throbbing of pain in her stomach. With obvious difficulty she tried swallowing again. Travis reached for the water carafe at her bedside stand, but already she was forcing words through her dry lips.

"I... I lost... the baby...." she said with insight in an almost inaudible tone. "The baby... baby is gone," she moaned weakly.

"Cathy?" he said, leaning over her. But her eyes were closed again, and she was once more asleep. There hadn't even been enough time for Travis to say that he loved her. And the quicker he left, the quicker he could return. Elizabeth

said the doctors wanted to keep Cathy for another two days at least. And if he hurried...

Travis touched his lips tenderly to Cathy's. "I love you," he whispered. "I love you, sweetheart, and I'll be back for you. I promise."

\*

TRAVIS thought with some surprise that nothing had changed. At least the outer buildings and property seemed the same. The enormous side yard, and the pond and the large climbable trees that had made the farm a world unto itself when he and Mitch were young remained.

Behind the wheel of the small compact wagon, Melinda pretended concentration on her driving while noting Travis's reaction to being at the farm again. "I'm glad you came, Travis. It's time." Melinda spoke softly to him. Travis tensed his jaw.

"Are you glad you came, Mel?" he asked.

"Oh, sure. The boys love it here!"

"And what about the interesting man from Boston who wanted to buy the houseboat?"

Melinda actually blushed. "He's still interesting," she said.

"Does he like kids?" Travis pursued softly.

"He seems to. The boys say they like him almost as much as they like you!"

"I'm glad for you," Travis said easily.

Melinda pulled the wagon up nearly in front of the door to the low ranch-style house and put the engine in neutral. Travis got out and stood back as Melinda shifted gears and pulled in farther from the house. One hand held his duffel bag; the other was thrust into the pocket of his slacks. Well, he was back. But he wasn't sure if it was still home.

His attention was caught by the door opening; a man of his own height struggled out, supporting his body on two hardwood canes.

"So...you've come home," Jim Hoyt said in a deep voice, curiously sad and slow. They continued to stare at each other, father and son, generations apart and a sea of misunderstandings between them. But they were cut of the same cloth. Stubborn, tough and proud.

Travis's head tilted. "That depends on you, I suppose."

His father watched him from icy gray eyes in a face weathered and mapped with lines but still strong. The eyes slowly softened as he shook his head. "No...not me, Travis. It was always up to you. You could have come home anytime."

OVER A COURSE of several days the conversation became easier, touching on old wounds that had never healed. It was to be expected, too, that Mitch's name would come up. How could it not, with so much unsettled feeling about his death between them?

Then there was the afternoon when Travis eyed his father sadly, almost like the young boy he used to be when he wanted his understanding. "I'm sorry, Dad. I never said so, but... I'm sorry about Mitch."

His father stared hard at him. "I never doubted it, son. But I never held you responsible...not once."

"I—I always believed you did."

Jim Hoyt sighed. "Yes, I know. God alone knows why."

Travis rubbed his forehead wearily. "I don't know. We—you and I—always seemed to be at each other's throats. We always seemed to disagree."

Jim chuckled. "Not *all* the time, though we certainly had our share of fights! You had spunk and conviction.... I will give you that!"

"Probably all misplaced!" Travis said.

"No, not that, either. I guess I forget at times—at least I used to—how similar we are, you and I."

Travis looked at his father, then away, squinting against the late-afternoon sun, low in the sky. "Still—"

"I don't love you any more or any less than I did Mitch, Travis. I'd hoped you would always know that. We were close, the three of us, in our own way. But he was my firstborn, and I lost him. Someday, when you have sons of your own, you'll understand."

Travis's eyes immediately clouded over with a thought of Cathy.

"When you love someone, it's with your whole heart," Travis's father said to him as they got up to walk toward the pond. "And you forgive the same way."

And then Jim Hoyt looked more closely and saw past one hurt in his son's face and into another. He could see now that more than Mitchell had brought Travis back.

"You want to tell me about it?" he asked gently.

Travis's head came up sharply at the soft question. He searched his father's aged features and saw the man he'd always loved. And he saw more insight and compassion than he'd ever expected from his father before. As the two men walked slowly around the land, Travis began to tell Jim about Cathy. Not everything, but enough to show that he loved her deeply, wanted to build a life and home with her, and wanted the two of them to meet.

They were oblivious of the chilling air and approaching night. They talked past dinner, ignoring Melinda's pealing bell. They talked past bed and on into the night until the birds reminded them of another day. And then Jim clamped his hand on Travis's strong shoulder.

"Come on, son. Let's get some breakfast. I think we could both use a strong cup of coffee!"

And Travis knew he was indeed home again.

THE AUGUST SUN was delicious and warm on Cathy's limbs, bak-

ing them to a healthy brown and completely obliterating the pale gauntness she'd arrived in Baltimore with three weeks ago. Cathy licked the last of the envelopes, grimacing over the sour, sticky taste of the glue and, sealing it, added it to a waiting stack of three others.

"Well, that's that!" she murmured to herself wryly, and sat back against the vinyl-covered cushion of her lounge chair and closed her eyes. It was very quiet in the small yard behind the house. Chad had his own apartment, yet he'd returned to the house where he and Cathy had been raised to keep her company, sensing that she'd need it. But he had told her it was temporary. He had his own life to get back to.

Today he was in New York on a photo assignment. Tomorrow he would be in New Jersey. Cathy sighed, she might just as well have been there alone. But when Chad had said his stay was only temporary, it was meant as a gentle reminder to his sister that she, too, would have to get on with her life.

Keeping in mind her contract with *Miami Magazine*, Cathy wrote one of the four commissioned articles and sent it off to Valerie Banner in Florida. The second in the series she'd just finished sealing in an envelope, and it would go out that day or the next. Some of the other letters were inquiries and proposals for a volume of her poetry. And finally,

Cathy had written a letter to Elizabeth Harris.

CATHY WALKED aimlessly around the yard, plucking a dry leaf here, pulling an overgrown weed there. She thought she had an idea for a children's story. Or maybe it was for grown-ups like herself. It was a story in long verse about a special kind of box with a dark center that kept changing and growing until after a time it was filled with a baby, all ready to come into the world. Cathy thought about the idea a lot, just as she often thought of Travis. It always made her want to cry.

September was only a few days away. She hadn't seen Travis in a month—since the abortion. She blinked, and as though in a trance, Cathy turned and quickly made her way into the house. She headed to her father's library and the shelf where he had kept the two thick family albums. Cathy leafed quickly through one book, eyes moving rapidly, knowing exactly what she was looking for. And it was there.

It was a picture of her father and mother during her mother's seventh month of pregnancy with Chad. Her mother, Sarah, wearing a maternity top and skirt, was looking right into the camera with a lovely soft smile on her face. Cathy's father was also looking into the camera. But his was more a look of pride and complacency. Perhaps quiet inner joy. One of his large hands was resting on his

wife's shoulder, the other around her waist, resting on the side of her rounded stomach. And one of her hands was on top of his.

Cathy stared long and hard at the picture—at her father and the look on his face. And suddenly she understood clearly the hollow feeling inside that had been like a sore that hurt all the time. It was sorrow. She might have been ambivalent about the prospects of motherhood, but she was not about a baby—and she was beginning to feel the loss and the difference.

But it was the second realization that grabbed at her heart and settled every question she'd been asking herself since she came back to Baltimore. She felt so sure of the answer that she began to cry as if her very heart would break—or until all her healing was complete.

"THE ALL CLEAR was officially broadcast over four hours ago, but thousands of people began returning to their coastal homes early yesterday morning. The hurricane watch, which began with the reporting last week of severe storm surges along the southern Florida tip, has already been downgraded as the storm died out in the Gulf.

"There is a second hurricane growling out in the southern Atlantic, but it's also expected to be downgraded to a tropical storm. We're in for more rain and high winds, but it's clear now from reports by the Hurricane Center at NOAA that the emergency is over.

"The continuing advisory for small crafts is that—"

Cathy switched off the radio filtering man-made sounds into the houseboat. She was left listening alertly to those of nature. The winds off Key West were a mere fifteen miles per hour, still angrily whipping rain against the porthole glass and washing it over the deck, but it was calming down.

Cathy let out a tired sigh and got up from the built-in table of the craft to put her empty coffee mug in the galley. She was dressed in the oversized red T-shirt Travis had allotted to her ages ago. It was warm enough for just the shirt now that she'd gotten the temperamental heater working, unlike four days ago when she'd first arrived and had to sleep fully clothed to stay warm. Now she stood by the partially boarded entrance to stare worriedly into the windy dark night and wonder where Travis was and if he was okay.

Cathy had gotten back to Miami as preparations were being made for the hurricane watch. And when it was clear that the predicted path would hit nowhere near Key West, Cathy had made her way there. It was from Joe, the bartender at the Waterfront Café that Cathy had gotten her crash course in how to protect herself and the houseboat in the storm while she waited for Travis to return. And she'd been there for nearly a week.

Cathy listened to a rumbling growl of thunder and watched

lightning streak the sky for an instant and then disappear. *It's the other storm*, she thought absently, not for the moment recognizing the final and complete eradication of a childhood affliction. Her whole being, all her thoughts, were simply and totally involved with Travis. Now she turned out the lights and made her way to the back bedroom. She curled up under the blankets and listened to the rain, letting its cadence rock her to sleep.

It was still dark and raining when Cathy heard the shuffling noise on deck. Her heart raced crazily at the initial shock of awaking and then settled to a normal rhythm. For days the wind had howled and swept loose objects and debris against the sides of the tightly moored boat. But this noise was different. Cautiously, Cathy got out of bed and, reaching for the flashlight, made her way to the front. She stopped before reaching the door, because it was once again quiet. Then there was another sound, and Cathy froze. The door slid open sharply, and she dropped the flashlight.

There was a paralyzing silence and then "Cathy?" came an incredulous voice, as a white beacon flashed in her face.

"Cat!" she heard even more distinctly, and stared in disbelief across the dark void.

"Travis!" she mouthed in a shaky voice, moving forward and right into his arms. He had on a wet slicker and in seconds she was

wet clear through but she hardly noticed. Travis's rough cheek was icy against her temple, his lips frosty on her ear, but his arms closed around her in warm welcome, crushing her to him.

"Cathy..." Travis croaked again, and dragged his mouth from her ear to her lips. He kissed her hard, the pressure forcing her mouth open, and at once he took possession with his tongue. But his exploration was gentle and slow. Then, suddenly, Travis grabbed Cathy by her upper arms and pushed her away from him. "What the hell are you doing here?" he exploded, shaking her.

Cathy's teeth were chattering from the cold air and his voice. "I—I didn't know where you were, where you'd gone. I—I had to make sure you were all right. I had to come back," she whispered brokenly. Her shock caught up to her, her worry draining out of her until she was limp, and her knees felt as though they would give way. Silent tears began rolling down her cheeks, because she was so glad to see him and it was not going as she'd imagined it would.

Travis, realizing that he'd frightened her as badly as she had alarmed him, groaned and cursed softly, once again gathering her close to him. After a while he could feel her shiver. He released her and turned on a light, which flickered but stayed. He turned back to Cathy.

She took his hand, and his strong fingers tightened as if he

had no intention of letting go. She began pulling him farther into the warm room and urging him to a chair. "I've been waiting for you," Cathy said softly as Travis eased into a canvas chair.

"Here? By yourself?" he asked, his voice and thinking weak with fatigue.

Cathy was starting to unbutton his shirt, pulling it from his pants. "Yes, here by myself," she confirmed.

"But...alone? There's been a storm raging for more than a week!"

Cathy saw the stark disbelief in his face, knowing how terrified of storms he'd seen her. She cupped her hands lovingly on either side of his face. "I wasn't afraid for myself, Travis. I was more concerned about you. And besides, Joe has been keeping an eye on me."

Travis blinked at her, his eyes more heavy-lidded each moment. Cathy's heart contracted painfully at his state. She wanted to love him, take care of him and never let him go. "Cathy..." he murmured brokenly, and putting his hand on her waist drew her between his spread knees and against his chest.

Cathy ran her hands into his wet hair and gratefully pressed his face into her chest. Travis's arms closed around her, his hands kneading her flesh through the T-shirt. Cathy felt instinctive physical stirrings at the contact, but not all of it was sexual. This was where they belonged—together. She laid her cheek against his hair. "I love

you...." she whispered, her throat tightening with the uttered words, the strain of waiting so long to say them like a cork on her emotions.

Travis was still for a long moment and then with a shudder held Cathy even tighter to him, pressing a kiss to her throat. "I love you, Cathy. Stay with me. I need you so much! Stay...please!"

"Yes—yes!" she whispered joyously.

It seemed an eternity that they held each other, perhaps afraid to let go and find it all a dream. Perhaps just needing each other as much as they did. But Cathy knew Travis had to get some rest. "Travis...look, you've got to get some sleep. I want you to go take a shower, and I'll make you something to drink. Come on now. Stand up."

He reluctantly released her. "You...won't go away?"

"I promise," Cathy said, and smiled gently at him.

She was just pouring a cup of coffee and lacing it with brandy when Travis emerged from the shower, one towel around his middle and another around his shoulders.

She turned off the lights and led him to the bedroom. While he sat heavily on the edge of the bed with the steaming cup, Cathy knelt and briskly towel-dried his hair.

"Did you fly during the storm?" she asked.

"Right into the eye of it," Travis mumbled drowsily.

"Was it...dangerous?"

"I suppose," Travis said after a moment. "I didn't really think about it. I'd already lost so much...it didn't matter. I thought I'd lost you."

Cathy stopped rubbing his hair and sat back on her heels. She didn't know how to tell him yet that she knew what he was feeling, that her heart had ached when she had recognized her own feelings. Cathy realized that she'd also been blind. She'd never considered Travis's feelings, never thought that he'd have any concerning the baby. She'd locked him out of her decision and rejected sympathy, understanding and maybe even his love.

"I was going to come for you, Cathy," Travis said in a tired voice. "As soon as this was over." He put the cup down and turned toward her. He put an arm across her lap and braced it on the bed so that she was facing him and within the half circle of his arm. "I didn't stay with you just because of our baby...but because I needed you, and love you."

"Oh, Travis..." Cathy said brokenly around the start of tears. Travis pulled her onto his lap.

"I went home to see my father," he murmured. "We still love and care for each other."

"I'm happy for you," Cathy whispered, a tear rolling down her cheek. "I'm glad that everything...is all right now."

Travis smiled and rubbed his thumb over her chin. "Not yet...but almost. I didn't know if

I had your love and forgiveness. I wasn't sure I ever would. But I told my father if I ever found out, I'd bring you home with me to Boston. Do you love me?" he asked. Cathy merely nodded, biting her lip against her tears. "Will you marry me now?" Again she nodded. "Then that's all that matters." Then he bent to give her the gentlest kiss, his lips barely touching the cool surface of hers.

CATHY STOOD on the deck, the wind ruffling her hair. It was three days after the predicted second storm and four days since Travis had returned to her. The sky was clearing, and Cathy took a deep breath of the salty sea air; she'd always associated its peculiar smell with Key West. She was not going to miss it there, or Florida, once they started for Boston. They were packing Travis's things now, but there was going to be a multitude of memories. She had found Travis there, and love. And she had grown up there.

The door slid open behind Cathy, and Travis came up behind her to slip his arms around her waist and interlock his fingers over her stomach. He kissed her cheek. "What are you doing out here? Can't you see it's going to rain?"

"Not for a few more hours yet." Cathy smiled.

Travis chuckled. "What...have you become a sage or something? Just remember I'm the weather expert in this family!" Travis settled her back against his chest and

rested his chin atop her head. "What are you thinking?"

Cathy sighed. "I was thinking that if I ever have a little girl, I'll call her...Jenny Rebecca."

Travis's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Sounds like the name of someone's grandmother."

Cathy, undaunted, said, "Don't laugh! It's a beautiful name. If you had a daughter, what would you call her?" Cathy asked.

Travis turned her around, his eyes traveling over her pert upturned face. "Katherine—with a K," he announced. "And I'd call her Kate for short. But it's purely academic, since we've already decided to wait a year or two. Right?"

"Right," Cathy agreed, putting her arms around his neck. "But there's no harm in being prepared, is there?"

Travis searched her pretty face. "None whatsoever. But I can think of another way to do it," and he began moving back into the houseboat, pulling Cathy with him.

"Travis!" Cathy feigned complaint. "We practiced and prepared all last night!"

He kissed her complaint away. "Practice makes perfect!" he countered and kissed her in earnest, a kiss and caress that clearly stated how much he loved her. His hands moved to her buttocks and, curving around her bottom, pulled her into his already-aroused hard middle.

"Umm...your practice is killing me," Cathy crooned.

Travis laughed softly. "We might as well now. When I get you to Boston, we'll be too busy getting settled."

She pulled back to look at him. "Travis, are you sure your father won't mind? I mean, if it's going to be too crowded, maybe we should find our own place."

Travis hid his amusement, still wanting to surprise Cathy with the fact that his father's crowded place was a thirteen-room house with nearly two hundred acres of land around it. "I'm sure Dad won't mind."

Travis leaned back against the edge of the built-in dining table and pulled her between his outstretched legs. Cathy pressed into his lean body with sensual familiarity.

"I think Chad would like us to stop by and visit with him for a few days. I think he should get to know you."

"Did you talk about me behind my back?" Travis asked.

Cathy grinned, flushing as she stroked his jaw and cheek. "A little. I told him all the good things I loved about you. And that even with your shortcomings, I was very much in love with you."

Travis swallowed, his fingers gently exploring her face. "And what did Chad say to that?"

Cathy shrugged. "He said to bring you home!"

Travis laughed. "Is he planning on meeting us with a shotgun in hand?"

"Chad isn't like that!" Cathy said indignantly.

Travis kissed her and hugged her to him. "It doesn't matter. I plan to make you an honest woman before we visit." Cathy snuggled happily in his embrace. "Cathy... You were right, you know."

"About what?" she asked, enjoying his kissing and caressing.

"You do see things clearly when you use your heart."

Cathy opened her eyes and smiled at him. "I told you so," she said. "And just think. We have a lifetime to work on perfect vision!"



## STAR SIGNS—JANUARY & FEBRUARY

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### SAGITTARIUS November 23-December 22

Finances should improve dramatically this month and you could receive an unexpected windfall. Creative pursuits are very well aspected and you have the confidence to make the most of your talents.



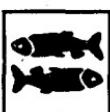
### CAPRICORN December 23-January 22

You're feeling full of energy and have a real passion for life this month. You have the confidence to tackle anything that comes your way, so it should be a highly successful and rewarding month both careerwise and in personal relationships.



### AQUARIUS January 23-February 22

Romance and passions are still running high. It is a good time to try and sort out your long-term goals with partners as they will be in a receptive mood. Finances could need a boost and you may have to put a project on hold temporarily.



### PISCES February 23-March 22

You must be more decisive over financial matters. Stop putting off until tomorrow what you should tackle today. Things really liven up later on in the month when a surprise offer could really excite you.



### ARIES March 23-April 22

Try not to overreact as you could be feeling very sensitive and liable to read more into a situation than is really there. If you keep an open mind you'll not only avoid family arguments, but you could come up with a solution to a long-term problem.



### TAURUS April 23-May 22

A recent romantic meeting has set your heart fluttering and provides a welcome distraction from the day-to-day rigors of life. A new job or challenge for you or your partner will however require a more down-to-earth approach.

*STAR SIGNS (continued)*



### GEMINI May 23-June 21

The exciting and busy period of last month may have left you feeling jaded and in need of a break. However, a new opening occurs which lifts your spirits and gives you a chance to plan for the future.



### CANCER June 22-July 22

It's a lucky month in store for you, friends and loved ones seem unusually attentive and responsive to your needs. Money matters are also well highlighted and there is a chance to make real progress.



### LEO July 23-August 22

Family matters are still very much on your mind. You could be surprised by the way others are thinking, but more likely it is you who needs to revise the way you are seeing recent events. Take great care not to breach a confidence.



### VIRGO August 23-September 22

Any self-doubts should vanish as you wake up to what you really can achieve this year. Start tackling any remaining problems head-on and they should be easily solved, leaving a clear road ahead.



### LIBRA September 23-October 22

Close relationships are going well with your partner, providing you with warmth and comfort just when you need it most. However, don't become complacent as you do have to sort out other areas of your life, especially on the career front.



### SCORPIO October 23-November 22

Time to take stock of your life and see where improvements could be made. Try taking up a new leisure activity. Being forced to meet different people could bring interesting developments.

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Phyllis Halldorson

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# READER'S CORNER

# CROSSWORD #22

**ACROSS**

- 1. Tease
- 5. Faucet
- 8. Relax
- 12. Indian money
- 13. Epoch
- 14. Church table
- 16. Model
- 17. Neither's partner
- 18. Locale
- 19. Put on
- 20. Lunatic
- 23. Center
- 24. Spider's net
- 25. Lager
- 26. Fitting
- 27. Picture
- 29. Guide
- 31. Drip
- 32. Appointment
- 35. Not under any circumstances

- 39. Moray
- 40. Rings
- 42. Poem
- 43. Hawaiian greeting
- 45. Relieve
- 46. Woodwind instrument
- 47. Carney et al.
- 49. Steam
- 51. Set
- 53. Grief
- 55. Colorado Indian
- 56. Belonging to him
- 57. Egg dish
- 59. Energy
- 62. Even
- 65. Before
- 66. Wear away
- 68. Cleanse
- 69. Illuminated
- 70. Pertaining to the sun

71. Fencing sword

72. Affirmative  
73. Swarm

22. Born

24. Chinese cooking

26. Fuss

27. Pare  
28. Angel's headgear

30. Some

31. Meadow

33. Fearfully

34. Pekoe

36. Tramp

37. Scent

38. Tiny

40. Glass container

41. Follies

44. Chapeau

46. Unlock, in

poetry

48. Couple

50. Affirm

51. Provoke

52. Take, as power

54. Uncanny

56. Informed

58. Rents

59. Mast

60. Dutch

cheese

61. For each

63. Eon

64. Actor

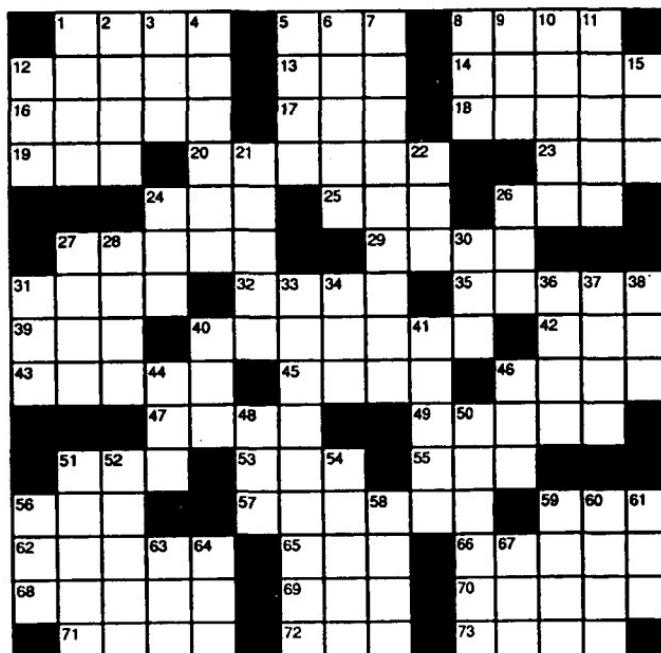
Majors

67. Fish eggs

Solution on page 63  
of this issue.

**DOWN**

- 1. Art of self-defense
- 2. Ajar
- 3. Ocean
- 4. Protective hat
- 5. Take care of
- 6. Fragrance
- 7. Similarities
- 8. Knock
- 9. Building addition
- 10. Postage square
- 11. Unexpressed
- 12. Disencumber
- 15. Crimson
- 21. Residence



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# Romances

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Roxie Lowell didn't believe for one moment that she and contractor Hank Craddock were destined to become lovers, no matter what her eccentric old friend, Charlie Hartman, claimed. After all, Charlie thought he was St. Valentine himself! But it soon became apparent that Charlie, or whoever he was, knew more about the affairs of the heart than these mere mortals.

ROBIN ELLIOTT—To Have It All

Brant Adams, ex-football star for the Los Angeles Flames, asked Jenna Winter to marry him the day they met. And he kept right on asking her saying, together, they could have it all. But could she say yes to a man who was afraid that love was just another four-letter word?

SONDRA STANFORD—Cupid's Task

Joshua Steele's task was difficult enough—to bring Kitty Peterson to Texas and reunite her with her ailing father, the ex-movie star who'd ignored Kitty for most of her life. But Cupid's task was far harder—to unite Josh and Kitty, and heal the heart wounds that kept both of them from trusting in love.

SANDRA KITT—Only with the Heart

Travis Hoyt emerged from the night to pluck her from a rain-swept doorway. His manner was rough, his face forbidding, but Cathy Donnelly gratefully accepted his offer of sanctuary from the storm. Soaked to the skin, chilled to the very marrow of her bones, Cathy followed Travis across a deserted Key West dock, too tired for second thoughts and much too young to be afraid. It was to be an unforgettable night for them both....